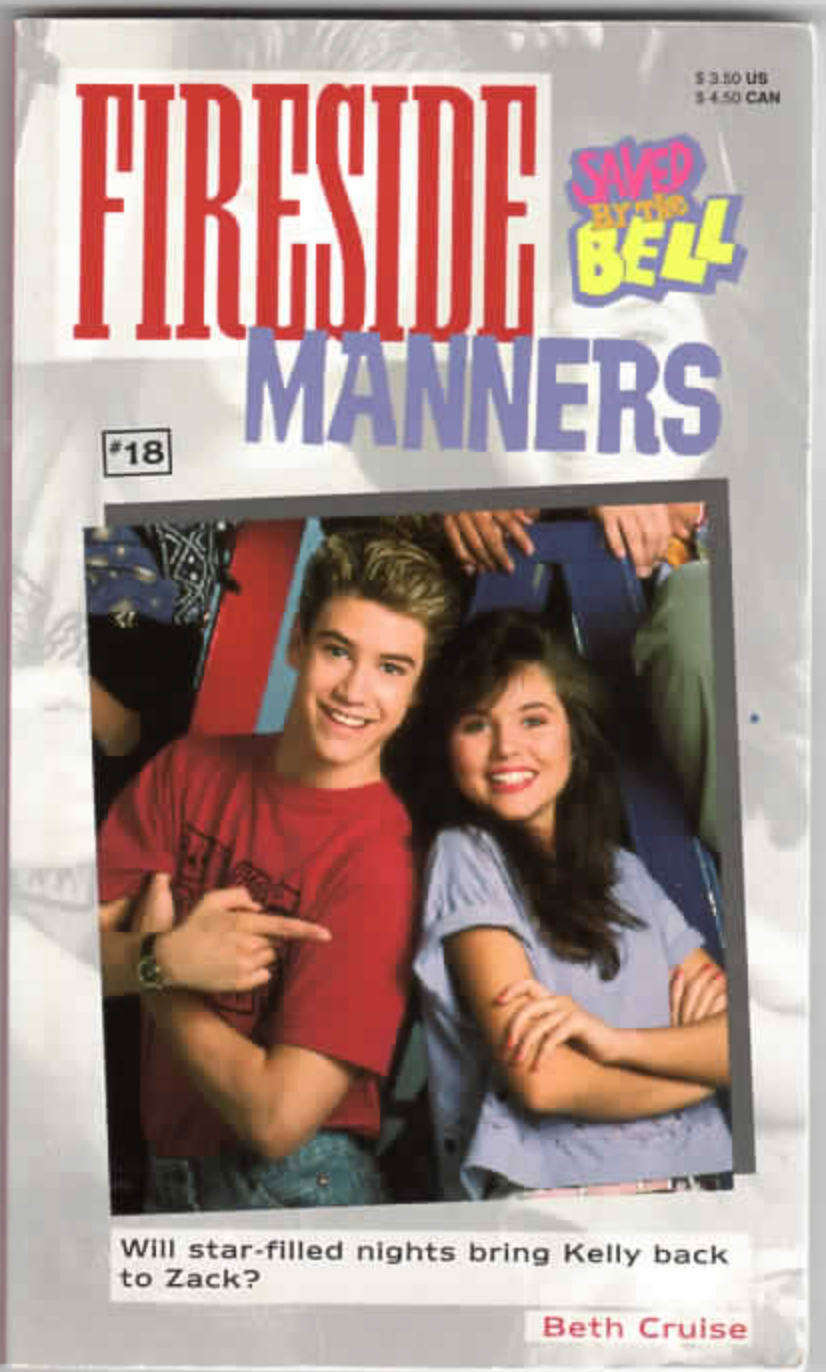
$ 3.50 US
$ 4.50 CAN
FIRESIDE
SAVED BY THE BELL
MANNERS
#18
Will star-filled nights bring Kelly back to Zack?
Beth Cruise

FIRESIDE MANNERS

ISBN 0-694-00092-4
9 780689 800924 50350

"Saved by the Bell" titles include:

Mark-Paul Gosselaar: Ultimate Gold
Mario Lopez: High-Voltage Star
Behind the Scenes at "Saved by the Bell"
Beauty and Fitness with "Saved by the Bell"
Dustin Diamond: Teen Star
The "Saved by the Bell" Date Book

Hot new fiction titles:

#1 Bayside Madness
#2 Zack Strikes Back
#3 California Scheming
#4 Girls' Night Out
#5 Zack's Last Scam
#6 Class Trip Chaos
#7 That Old Zack Magic
#8 Impeach Screech!
#9 One Wild Weekend
#10 Kelly's Hero
#11 Don't Tell a Soul
#12 Computer Confusion
#13 Silver Spurs
#14 Best Friend's Girl
#15 Zack in Action
#16 Operation: Clean Sweep
#17 Scene One, Take Two
#18 Fireside Manners
#19 Picture Perfect

FIRESIDE MANNERS

by Beth Cruise

ALADDIN PAPERBACKS

Photograph and logo copyright © 1995 by National Broadcasting Company, Inc. All rights reserved. "Saved by the Bell"™ is a trademark of the National Broadcasting Company, Inc. Used under license.
Text copyright © 1995 by Aladdin Paperbacks
All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form
Aladdin Paperbacks
An imprint of Simon & Schuster
Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020
First Aladdin Paperbacks edition 1995
Manufactured in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Cruise, Beth.
Fireside manners / by Beth Cruise.— 1st Aladdin Paperbacks ed.
p. cm.
"Saved by the bell ; #18"—
Summary: Zack and the rest of the Bayside High gang chaperon a group of ten-year-olds on a weekend camping trip in the mountains.
ISBN 0-689-80092-4
[1. Camping—Fiction.] I. Title.
PZ7.C88827Fi 1995
[Fic]—dc20 94-39807

To everyone who's found romance under the stars

Chapter 1

▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

Zack Morris's day improved the moment Kelly Kapowski swung through the doors of the Max, the favorite hangout of Bayside High students. The school bell had rung an hour ago signaling the end of the school week, but Kelly had been nowhere to be found when the gang headed for their usual booth in the restaurant.

Zack watched happily as Kelly's long dark brown hair swung against her shoulders. She tripped lightly down the steps and headed for the table, a bright smile on her pretty face. He sighed quietly with pleasure just at the sight of her, then turned quickly to frown at a half dozen other guys who also sighed with longing as Kelly passed their tables.

Well, that's what happens when you're in love with the sweetest girl to ever grace the hallowed halls of Bayside, Zack thought. Not to mention the girl with the most gorgeous legs.

"Have I got a surprise for you!" Kelly announced, slipping into the booth next to Zack.

Lisa Turtle eyed Kelly suspiciously. "I have a feeling I'm not going to like this," she muttered.

"How can you tell?" Samuel "Screech" Powers asked innocently, then looked sly. "I'll bet you've been working on developing your psychic powers, haven't you, my darling? I should have known. You've been thinking about me a lot lately, visiting me in my dreams."

"Only in my *nightmares,*" Lisa countered. She'd been trying to discourage Screech's crush on her for years, but nothing she did could shake his leechlike devotion.

"Well, I'm sure I'll like it," Zack assured Kelly.

"I know I will," A. C. Slater said, flashing one of his deeply dimpled smiles.

"So don't keep us in suspense," Jessie Spano insisted. "Where have you been and what is this surprise?"

Kelly nearly bounced in her seat with excitement. "I was at my little sister Erin's school. You know she's in the fifth grade at Ewald Bruiserback Elementary.

Well, her class was going to go on a weekend camping trip in the mountains."

Lisa shivered. The idea of living in a tent was too scary to even think about, much less do.

"Sounds like fun," Slater said.

"Erin was really looking forward to it. She's been making everybody nuts at home all week talking about it," Kelly admitted. That was no minor fact considering Kelly had five brothers and two sisters and the Kapowski house was always a little crazy.

Jessie tilted her head to one side, her dark curly hair falling over her shoulder. "You said *was,* Kelly. That sounds like the trip is off."

Kelly nodded but her smile didn't dim. "It was. I had Mom's car today so I could pick Erin up after school. She was nearly in tears because they needed chaperons to go with the class and hadn't been able to find enough volunteers. So—"

Lisa groaned and covered her ears with her hands. "I don't want to hear this."

"So," Kelly continued, "I volunteered all of us to go with them."

Lisa gave a short scream at the news.

Screech put his arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry. I'll take care of you, Lisa," he assured her.

When none of the gang joined in her enthusiasm,

Kelly's smile faded. "Aren't you free this weekend?" she asked them.

"*This* weekend? You mean the weekend that starts tomorrow morning and ends the day after?" Zack asked.

Kelly looked at him, disappointment written clearly on her face. "But you promised me we could do anything I wanted to this weekend," she reminded him.

Zack cringed. He'd been trying to be more romantic in his effort to win Kelly back as his steady girlfriend. So he had embarked on a new strategy, one where he actually listened to Kelly and did what she wanted rather than just drag her along to do what he wanted. It was a strain. Still he was desperate enough to try anything. But camping? With a bunch of ten-year-old kids?

"*This* weekend?" he repeated again.

"I need just three boys and two other girls to go with me. If you can't do it, I'll find someone else."

Zack noticed that a couple of guys at the next table were eavesdropping and looking more than ready to join Kelly's expedition. What guy wouldn't want to spend time with her around a campfire? Away from the city the stars would be brighter, the moonlight even more romantic, and the cool nights just right for having a girl snuggle close to a guy to keep warm.

There were also bugs that feasted on campers, no TV to watch, and no girls in bikinis to enjoy looking at. How could anyone prefer being in the mountains to being on the beach?

One of the guys at the next table got to his feet and took a step in Kelly's direction.

Zack wasted no more time. "Sure, I'd be glad to go with Erin's class," he said, "and so would Slater and Screech."

"I would?" Slater echoed, obviously unwilling to give up his weekend.

"You wouldn't think of missing it," Zack assured him.

"*I* sure wouldn't want to miss it," Screech said. "The mountains have some interesting hexapods I'd like to collect."

"Hexa whats?" Lisa asked.

"He means bugs," Jessie said. "The six-footed kind."

Lisa's shiver of repulsion was even stronger than before. "Pul-eese," she pleaded. "I'm beginning to feel crawly all over."

Kelly looked at each of her friends in turn. "Come on, guys. I need help and this will be fun."

Lisa dropped her head on the table and covered it with her arms, trying to block out any further word of the camping trip.

"Please," Kelly pleaded. "Counting Erin there

are only twelve kids going. That's two for each of us to watch over. And it isn't like we're going to be alone. Mr. Knight will be with us."

Jessie had been leaning back in the booth, but she sat forward in a hurry now. "Mr. Knight? You don't mean Damon Knight, do you?"

Kelly nodded.

"Damon Knight who was the star quarterback at California University three seasons running?" Jessie demanded.

"Yeah," Kelly answered, a bit bewildered by her friend's sudden interest.

Slater's brow was furrowed as he stared at Jessie. "Since when do you know football statistics, momma?"

"Since Damon Knight spoke in favor of equal financial backing for the women's athletic programs at the college," she said. Jessie was all for equality, although she frequently seemed to feel women were superior to men. At least, she did if her derogatory comments to Slater about Neanderthal-minded jocks were taken seriously.

"I heard Damon Knight had returned to Palisades to be a teacher, but I didn't know where. You can definitely count me in on the trip," Jessie told Kelly. "I wouldn't miss a chance to meet Mr. Knight in person and discuss his views on various

issues. Perhaps he'll even let me read some of his poetry."

Slater held up his hand. "Wait a minute. Are you telling me that Damon Knight, who was one of the best quarterbacks ever to handle a football, writes poetry?"

Jessie flipped her hair back over her shoulder. "He's had some beautiful verses published in magazines," she said. "He writes about love."

"No way," Slater insisted.

"This guy I have got to meet," Zack said. "What's he doing teaching fifth grade?"

Kelly shrugged. "I don't know. But I was surprised when all the mothers who had originally volunteered to go backed out. I suppose their husbands didn't want them going off into the woods with such a good-looking guy and that's why he needed new volunteers."

Lisa raised her head from the table. "Good-looking?" she repeated.

"Great-looking," Jessie said.

"*Really* great-looking," Kelly insisted. "This is his first year teaching, so he's not that much older than we are, either."

"Forget the stupid love poetry," Slater said. "I want to ask him about the pass he made to win the game against Forum Mason Tech his last year. Now

that was real poetry. You can count me in, Kelly. I'll be glad to camp out with Erin's class and Damon Knight."

"He's really great-looking?" Lisa asked.

"Incredibly so," Jessie assured her.

Kelly sighed dreamily. "I'll say."

Zack decided he was going to stay close by Kelly's side the whole trip. Not only would he wring every romantic moment alone with her that he could out of the trip, but he'd make sure she wasn't sighing over Erin's teacher anymore. It wasn't going to be easy being in competition with a handsome jock who wrote poetry, though. Maybe he should try a few lines himself.

Roses are red, violets are blue.
In how to write poetry, I haven't got a clue.

No, that wouldn't do.

Kelly Kapowski's a girl in a million.
To give her my love, I'm really quite willin'.

Better. He'd have to work on it a little more, Zack decided. When he finished, he'd have a sonnet worthy of Shakespeare. Or Damon Knight, at any rate.

Kelly looked around at her friends. "Okay. So Zack's going?"

"Wouldn't miss it," he said.

"And Slater?"

"Uh-huh," Slater mumbled, his mind apparently

elsewhere. "I wonder if Knight got that distance by holding the ball a certain way?"

Kelly turned to Screech.

"You know I'll be there, Kelly," he said. "I'd never let you down."

"Thanks, Screech. And you'll go, Jessie?"

"Absolutely," Jessie promised.

Kelly's blue eyes fixed on Lisa. "I need one more girl to go with us. Please, Lisa?"

Lisa looked from one of her friends to the next. They all seemed to be urging her to go with them. Normally she would, but this was real camping! Not staying in a privately owned cabin as they had done before on a trip to Last Chance, California. Of course, the cabin hadn't been as great as she had expected. There had been no hot tub, no heated indoor pool, no satellite dish.

"I don't do rustic well," Lisa said.

"This isn't all that rustic," Kelly argued. "It's a regularly used campground with large dormitorylike tents that have wooden floors and all the conveniences of home."

"Like a microwave?"

"No, but—"

"A hot shower?"

"No, but—"

"Telephones? Cable TV?" Lisa demanded.

"No, but we'll be too busy having fun with the kids to even miss those things. It's only for one night and two days, Lisa. Please?"

"I'll break a nail," Lisa said, desperate enough to try anything to get out of going with her friends.

"No, you won't," Jessie told her. "You didn't the last time we went to the mountains."

"Believe me, Lisa, everything is under control," Kelly assured her. "The school system is supplying all the food and equipment. Mr. Knight is driving the bus. What kind of problems can we possibly have?"

Lots, Lisa thought.

She was still trying to think of a way to get out of the camping trip and not hurt Kelly's feelings when the door to the Max opened and a tall, incredibly handsome young man entered the restaurant. For a moment, before the door swung shut, he stood there bathed in a beam of golden California sunlight. It polished the copper highlights in his brown hair. His eyes scanned the room; his whole face brightened when he spotted the gang.

"Kelly! Hi!" he called.

Kelly waved, a wide smile of greeting curving her lips. "Mr. Knight! Come meet my friends."

"*That's* Mr. Knight?" Lisa gasped, stunned. "Ah, about your camping trip, Kelly? I think I just might go with you guys, after all."

Chapter 2

▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

On Saturday morning, when Lisa's parents dropped her off in the yard of Ewald Bruiserback Elementary School, she was wearing a brightly flowered romper, a wide-brimmed hat decorated with a couple of artistically placed silk posies, flat-heeled dress shoes, and sunglasses. Because they would be gone only one night, she had packed just necessities. They filled three bulging canvas suitcases.

Jessie hurried up to meet her. Dressed in jeans, T-shirt, and athletic shoes, as was everyone except Lisa, Jessie had all her camping equipment neatly in her backpack.

"Good morning," Jessie greeted, then looked at Lisa's outfit and her luggage, and shook her head in

disbelief. "You're planning on camping with us? Where's your sleeping bag?" she asked.

Lisa took off her sunglasses and stared at her friend. "Sleeping bag?"

"It's what you sleep in when you go camping," Jessie said.

"Oh, I know what it is," Lisa assured her, "but owning one, or sleeping in one, is just not me." She tapped the smallest of her bags with one toe. "I brought sheets, blankets, a comforter, an air mattress, pillows, a sleep mask, and earplugs."

"Earplugs?"

"So I won't be disturbed by all those crickets and things chirping," Lisa explained. "I do need my beauty sleep, you know."

"But what if we have an emergency?" Jessie asked. "You won't know anything is going on if you're wearing the sleep mask and earplugs."

Lisa's eyes grew wide. "Emergency? What kind of emergency?"

"Well, bears, for instance."

Lisa backed up a step and nearly fell over her row of suitcases. "Kelly said nothing about bears."

"Bears?" Screech skidded to a halt at Lisa's side as swiftly as if he'd materialized there. "You have nothing to worry about, Lisa. Just use this if you see one." He fumbled in the backpack slung over his

shoulder, then handed her a plastic spray bottle filled with a greenish-looking liquid.

Not sure of what was in it, Lisa held the bottle between two fingers and at arm's length. "What is it?"

"Bear repellent," Screech announced proudly. "I made it myself."

"And does it work?" Jessie asked.

"Of course it works. Do you see any bears around here?" Screech demanded.

Lisa sighed and handed the bear repellent back to him. "We're in the middle of Palisades, dork. There haven't been any bears around here since the circus was in town."

"I loved the circus," Screech said, his voice breaking with emotion.

"You should feel right at home then," Lisa told him. "This looks like a circus."

Confused parents and children milled around the school yard. Only Kelly and her little sister, Erin, seemed to be relaxed and happy. They were laughing with and talking to everyone.

Jessie glanced at the crowd, too. "They are a little disorganized," she admitted. "But I'm sure that will end when Mr. Knight gets here with the bus."

"I hope it's soon," Screech said. "He told us he was bringing the food, and I'm starved."

A moment later a big yellow school bus pulled

into the school driveway and came to a stop. It wasn't the fifth-grade teacher who stepped down from the bus first, though; it was Zack Morris. Slater was on his heels, followed by Mr. Knight.

Mr. Knight was immediately surrounded by his excited students and their rather relieved-looking parents. Zack and Slater pushed their way over to where Lisa, Jessie, and Screech stood waiting.

"Hi, gang. Everybody ready to go?" Zack asked.

"Yep," Screech said.

"Absolutely," Jessie answered.

"I'm not so sure," Lisa murmured, one finger to her lips as she mentally riffled through her luggage. "I think I left my hot rollers at home."

Zack put his arm around Lisa's shoulders. "I'm afraid I have some really bad news for you," he said, sadly. "There is no electricity at the campsite."

"Don't be ridiculous, Zack. These are the nineteen nineties. Everyone has electricity, even campgrounds," Lisa informed him.

"Not this one."

Lisa frowned. "What do you mean, not this one? It has to have power. How else am I going to use my hair dryer, nail dryer, makeup light, or electric toothbrush?"

"Looks like you aren't going to use them," Zack said, and picked up one of her bags. "Are you sure this is all you need?"

"I need to have my head examined," Lisa snapped. "First bears and now no power. This weekend is going to be a total disaster—I just know it."

"Buck up, my lovely," Screech urged. "I'll be by your side constantly."

Lisa rolled her eyes. "What did I tell you?" she said to Zack. "Total disaster. Maybe I shouldn't go."

"Lisa!" a man's voice called over the noise of the excited ten-year-olds.

Glancing up, Lisa found Mr. Knight pushing his way through the crowd toward her. He was even more handsome than he had been the day before, she thought. His emerald green eyes glowed with excitement, and he looked great in his jeans, T-shirt, and hiking boots. In fact, he looked more like one of the gang than he did a teacher.

"Lisa," Mr. Knight said, grabbing her hand and shaking it. "I'm so glad you're here. Come meet some of the parents. It will soothe them to know we have someone trained in first aid along with us."

As the handsome young teacher pulled a dazed-looking Lisa in his wake, Zack turned to his friends. "She's going with us."

"Not if we don't get her luggage on the bus," Slater insisted. "Are you guys going to help me with this stuff?" He hefted a bag in each hand.

"I'll help," Screech said. He grabbed the handle of the remaining suitcase, tried to lift it, and fell over

on his face. The bag remained right where it had been while Screech got slowly to his feet, his eyes a bit crossed in confusion.

"I'd like to help," Zack declared, backing away. "But I've got to see to . . . to . . . to things," he finished, and rushed off.

Slater looked after him in disgust, then at Screech, now straining to lift Lisa's bag with two hands. It still wouldn't budge.

"Jessie?" Slater asked.

She sighed loudly. "Oh, all right." Pushing Screech gently to the side, Jessie picked up Lisa's remaining bag. Then, swinging it in one hand, she strolled along next to Slater as they headed toward the brightly colored school bus. "You think there's a chance that Lisa will survive this camping trip? She doesn't seem very prepared," Jessie said, her voice full of concern.

"What do you mean Lisa?" Slater demanded, glancing back over his shoulder as one of the fifth graders ran by. He was just in time to see Screech try to avoid the child, trip, and land flat on his face again. "I'm not so sure Screech will survive it!"

▲ ▼ ▲

Kelly's pretty face was wreathed in smiles. Widely grinning ten-year-olds surrounded her. "Isn't this great?" she asked.

Anything was great as long as Kelly was with him, Zack thought. "Yeah, really great," he said. "As soon as we get everything loaded, we should be ready to go."

Kelly turned her attention to the children. "You hear that? Let's get your things together. Just toss Zack your sleeping bags."

The young campers took her seriously. They threw their sleeping bags at Zack. He went down in an avalanche of well-padded bedrolls. Pushing them aside, he staggered against the side of the bus, feeling a bit dizzy.

"Zack," Kelly said with an exasperated sigh.

There were two of her, both kind of fuzzy, as if he needed to fine-tune his eyeballs. Zack shook his head and looked at her again. This time there was only one and a half of her.

"Zack, stop kidding around," Kelly said.

"Yeah, Zack," Erin echoed, a shorter version of Kelly but even more exasperated with him. "Stop kidding around."

"But . . . but . . . ," he stammered.

Kelly and Erin looked at each other and shook their heads. Two identical dark brown ponytails swung as they turned away.

Zack reached for the back door of the bus and pulled it open. The only way he was going to have time alone with Kelly was to get the campers on the

road and on their way to the mountains. Then he could settle back and plan the next step in his campaign. Would it be a leisurely walk along the banks of a bubbling mountain brook? Or should he wait until night, with the romantic light of a full moon shining down upon them? He really should work on a poem to quote to her. Something better than he'd come up with so far.

The breeze seems to whisper your name
Kelly, Kelly.
The sound of it's making my knees
Jelly, jelly.
All I can think of is
Kelly, Kelly
And how I'd like to take her to a
Deli, deli.

Maybe he'd better eat before working on any more verse so his mind wouldn't be on food.

"Will you let go?" Slater's voice demanded sharply.

Zack let go of the bus's back door. It swung wide, nearly spilling Slater, who was inside, out onto the pile of sleeping bags.

"Hey! Not you, preppie," Slater said, catching his balance on one of the backseats in the bus. "I mean this kid!" He pointed to a blond-haired boy who had

wrapped his arms and legs around Slater's leg and was resisting all attempts to dislodge him. "Let go," Slater ordered.

The boy hung on all the tighter. "But I'm showing you how koala bears act," he explained calmly. "They also eat eucalyptus leaves."

"I hate koala bears," Slater said. "That's why I live here instead of . . . of wherever there are koala bears."

"Australia," the boy said. "My grandmother lives there; that's why I know about them."

Zack leaned against the bus. "Why do you hate koalas, Slater? Cute, cuddly little guys, aren't they?"

"Zack," Slater growled. "Get him off me."

"Girls like cute, cuddly things, don't they?" Zack asked.

"*Girls?*" The ten-year-old boy shuddered with revulsion but kept his grip on Slater's leg. "I hate girls."

"Oh, they aren't so bad," Zack assured him. "In fact, I'll bet they'd love to see you do this cute, cuddly impression of a koala."

Zack glanced over his shoulder to where Kelly's sister stood talking to some of her friends. "Hey, Erin! Come over here a minute."

"Erin Kapowski?" the fake koala gasped. He let go of Slater's leg and jumped down from the bus. A second later he streaked to the opposite side of the

blacktop, putting as much space as possible between himself and Kelly's sister.

He didn't even notice that Erin ignored Zack's invitation.

"You know," Zack mused to Slater as he watched the boy tear away, "that's the exact same effect Erin has on me."

Chapter 3

▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

After the sleeping bags and duffle bags and gym bags and canvas bags and Lisa's cosmetics bag were all stored in the rear of the bus, Mr. Knight herded his young campers aboard.

"Now, before we get started, perhaps you'd better meet our volunteer counselors," he told them all.

He touched Kelly's shoulder. Kelly grinned up at him from her seat. Zack ground his teeth together.

"Some of you might already know Erin's sister, and these are her friends," the teacher continued. He moved on down the bus to where the rest of the gang was seated. "This is Slater . . ."

"Kinda cute," Erin was heard to whisper loudly to her particular group of friends, "but he plays foot-

ball, is on the wrestling team, and works on cars, so you know he gets really sweaty and smelly."

"... Jessie ..."

"She's really smart and really dumb, too," Erin declared, "'cause she gets straight A's but she is *not* a cheerleader."

"... Screech ..."

"Likes bugs and he's weird-looking."

"... Lisa ..."

"Hates to get her clothes dirty."

"... and Zack."

"A real dope. He likes Kelly a whole lot and will pay *anything* I want so he can be alone with her," Erin concluded.

"Now, I need everybody to stay in their seats and behave while I drive the bus," Mr. Knight said. "Maybe Kelly and the gang have some ideas on how to make the time pass quickly."

Kelly bounced up from her seat as he started the bus. "We sure do, Mr. Knight." She held up a clipboard and a pencil. "Lots of people come to California to visit, so I thought we could keep track of the different license plates we see. You tell me what state they are, and I'll write them down."

The fifth graders all stared at her.

"That's really lame," Erin said, assuming the job of speaker for her classmates. "You aren't going to tell us to count cows and horses, too, are you?"

Kelly's face fell. Counting livestock *had* been the next thing she was going to suggest. She dropped back in her seat in disappointment.

Jessie jumped to her feet as Mr. Knight pulled the bus out on the street. "Then we'll sing songs," she declared. "How about 'Old MacDonald Had a Farm'?"

"We're not in kindergarten," Erin insisted. "Let's sing Andy Prime's new song."

"'I'm Gonna Kiss You, Stupid'?" Lisa said, settling herself in the front-most seat near Damon Knight. "I really like that song. What about you, Mr. Knight?"

He navigated through traffic, heading for the highway. "I don't think it's exactly appropriate for ten-year-olds," he said.

"Neither do I," Jessie said. "Anybody know 'The Bear Went over the Mountain'?"

"Not bears again," Lisa groaned.

The kids looked at each other and shrugged.

"Don't know that one, huh?" Jessie mumbled. "Any suggestions, Kelly?"

Kelly looked desperate for an idea. "'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' in rounds?"

Erin led the boos.

Screech cleared his throat, as if he were about to make a speech, and began to sing loudly and a bit off time. "Nine hundred bottles of pop on the shelf, nine

hundred bottles of pop. Take one down and pass it around, eight hundred ninety-nine bottles of pop on the shelf. Eight hundred ninety-nine bottles of pop on the shelf, eight hundred ninety-nine bottles of pop. Take one down and pass it around, eight hundred ninety-eight bottles of pop on the shelf. Eight hundred ninety-eight bottles of pop on the shelf, eight hundred ninety-eight bottles of pop. Take one down and . . ."

Slater groaned and slid low in his seat. Zack grabbed a baseball hat off the boy in front of him, put it over his face, and pretended to be asleep. Lisa put her hands over her ears. Jessie and Kelly looked at each other and shrugged. They began singing along with Screech, and soon Erin and her friends had joined in.

"That's more like it," Mr. Knight declared.

Lisa didn't hear him. She'd hastily used her earplugs to block out the off-tune song.

▲ ▼ ▲

Zack turned over various ideas for poems in his mind and rejected them one by one. He'd already had trouble rhyming things with Kelly, and blue had been just as bad, so that meant mentioning her eyes was out, too. What about her pretty brown hair?

Brown, clown, down, frown, hound, mound, pound, round, sound, town, wound—nope. Not much he could do with those words and still sound romantic.

Beautiful? Dutiful, suitable, mutable, rootable, cuteable—was there such a word?

Well, try gorgeous. Hmm . . .

Nothing rhymed with gorgeous.

What about love? Dove, shove—too limited. Moon, June, soon, tune, loon, rune, zoon. Zoon?

How did a guy go about writing a poem for his girl? Or the girl he wanted to be his girl? Especially if she'd been his girl then decided she didn't want to be his girl, but he wanted her to be his girl, so he was determined to make her want to be his girl again.

Kelly Kapowski is the sweetest girl I know.
When I wish on a star, what I wish
for is to be her beau.
She isn't hot on money so
it doesn't take a lot of dough.
If there were seeds of love,
near her is where I'd them sow.
When she dates other guys it makes me oh,
so low.
I think of her constantly when the grass I do
mow.
A regular river of love from me does flow.
In a boat upon it, in the evening would I her
row.
We could run through a meadow,
trying not to stub a toe.

If she were mine again, I'd just have to say,
Well, whoa!

Hmm . . . not bad. If he could just remember it all when the time came. At least it had enough words that rhymed.

"Seven hundred and three bottles of pop on the shelf, seven hundred and three bottles of pop. Take one down and pass it around," Screech bellowed happily in the seat across from Zack. The kids sang along with him, none of them having dropped out of the song along the way. Jessie and Kelly were singing, too, but they looked unhappy to be doing so, and weren't singing loud enough to be heard.

Somehow Slater had managed to fall asleep.

In the front of the bus, Mr. Knight was tapping his fingers against the steering wheel to the music. If you could call it music. The guy might have the girls sighing over him, he might have Slater eager to learn football secrets, and he might write poetry, but he was tone deaf if he actually liked Screech's song.

"Six hundred and sixty-seven bottles of pop on the shelf, six hundred and sixty-seven bottles of pop. Take one down . . ."

Zack was ready to take one down, all right, but he was thinking more of beaning Screech with it rather than passing it around.

Outside the bus window, the scenery was beginning to change. They had gone from their own beautiful city beside the Pacific Ocean to a patch of desert and were finally climbing the lower slopes of the mountains. The air that rushed in through the open window was cooler, and the trees looked like undecorated Christmas trees. It wouldn't be long before they reached their campsite.

"Six hundred and fifty bottles of pop on the shelf . . ."

Zack cringed as Screech's voice cracked, creating a very unmusical note. Zack sank in his seat. The drive couldn't be over soon enough as far as he was concerned.

▲ ▼ ▲

"You didn't always want to be a fifth-grade teacher, did you?" Lisa asked Mr. Knight, trying to be heard over the campers' song. When she had removed her earplugs she was amazed to find they'd only sung their way through six hundred and twenty-four bottles.

Mr. Knight slowed the bus so that he could make it around a tight curve in the mountain road. "You mean, didn't I want to be a fireman or something more exciting?"

"Well, yes," Lisa admitted. Being an elementary school teacher didn't sound very great to her.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Lisa," he said. "But

I always wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to when I was the same age as these kids. I wanted to when I was your age. I still want to."

"But why?" she asked. It seemed such a waste of a good-looking guy to be stuck in Ewald Bruiserback Elementary.

Mr. Knight tossed her a quick smile, keeping his attention on the road. "Think about it," he urged. "What other job lets you leave in the middle of the afternoon, gives you a week off for Christmas and Easter, and the whole summer off?"

Now that made sense to her.

"That's what appealed to me when I was a kid," Mr. Knight continued. "Now I love it because it's exciting to simply teach these kids."

"*These* kids?" Lisa demanded in disbelief.

He chuckled. "They usually don't have an attention span this long," he said. "I think they're still singing just to annoy your friends."

"Well, they're sure doing that," Lisa agreed. "Are you going to teach fifth grade forever, then?"

"No," Mr. Knight said. "I plan to be a principal in a few years."

Lisa stared at him. A principal? Like Mr. Belding? This was getting scarier and scarier.

"You're kidding, aren't you?" she asked.

"I don't kid about my career, Lisa," Mr. Knight insisted. "Ah, I think this is our destination."

And none too soon, Lisa thought. Then she looked at it carefully and wondered if she could fake being majorly sick so Mr. Knight would have to drive her back down to civilization.

The campsite was in a small clearing. In the center of it sat two long, yucky brown-green–colored tents. The sides of each were rolled up so she could see a row of narrow cots down the middle. At least there would be no sleeping on the floor. There were bound to be bugs, though. Lots of bugs.

Lisa shivered just at the thought. She hoped she had brought enough insect repellent, but she doubted it. There probably wasn't enough spray in the world to debug this place.

Why, oh, why had she let the gang talk her into coming with them?

Mr. Knight pulled the bus to a stop and turned off the engine. "Ready to have fun?" he asked everyone.

He grinned at Lisa, in particular. He looked so gorgeous she nearly sighed out loud.

Oh yeah. Now she remembered why she had come. Of course, that was before she'd learned he wanted to be a principal.

A *principal.*

Eww!

Chapter 4

▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

"Oh, Zack," Kelly cried happily, and threw her arms around his neck in a quick hug. "I'm so glad you came on this trip with me and got everyone else to volunteer as well."

Zack didn't remember having much to do with the rest of the gang's decision to jump on the camping bandwagon, but he wasn't about to tell Kelly she had that little detail wrong. Instead, he hugged her back.

Kelly took a seat on a bench that looked more like a rejected board from the lumberyard balanced between two tree stumps. "I know Lisa decided to join us because of Mr. Knight's looks, and Jessie because of Mr. Knight's poetry, and Slater because of Mr. Knight's football plays, but they wouldn't have if you hadn't already said you were coming."

This wasn't the time to let her know he'd come to keep her from having romantic moments with any guy but him, Zack figured. That was a confession no guy in his right mind would ever make. And, since he'd seen admiration in Kelly's eyes when she looked at the handsome fifth-grade teacher, Zack was sure he was up against some pretty tough competition.

Not only was the guy someone his friends were looking up to—the fact that he enjoyed being around the younger kids was putting sappy smiles on all the girls' faces.

At least Screech hadn't volunteered to go on the trip just to be near Mr. Knight.

Screech himself had become a hero of sorts to three bug enthusiasts and was at this moment demonstrating his technique with a butterfly net.

"Well, I came to be near you," Zack confessed, taking Kelly's hand as he sat down next to her. The board bench tilted a bit before settling into place once more.

Kelly's eyes softened. "Oh, Zack, that is such a romantic thing to say."

"I mean it. You know you're the only person I want to spend time with, Kelly."

Her eyes fell. Kelly looked at their linked hands. "I like being with you, too, Zack, but . . ."

Uh-oh.

"... I can't help wondering if things would be different or the same if we got back together again."

By "the same," Zack had a feeling she wasn't talking about the good times they had had together. Kelly was thinking only of the scams he'd pulled and the other girls that had been involved in them.

"How different do you want it to be?" Zack asked, figuring if he knew what she was hoping for, it would make it easier for him to get it right.

Kelly stared off into the trees. "Oh, I don't know." Unfortunately, Mr. Knight was crossing the campsite clearing with Erin riding piggyback on his shoulders while her friends danced around them excitedly.

"I'll do anything you want," Zack promised hastily before Kelly could get all mushy over her sister's teacher.

She turned back to him, her pretty blue eyes wide with surprise. "But I don't know what to tell you, Zack. These past few weeks have been very nice."

He'd been hoping they were better than very nice. That they had been perfect. On their last date he'd eaten the type of food she wanted, even though he didn't care much for Chinese. He was always so hungry for a burger when he finished eating chop suey. And before that he'd gone to see a movie starring her favorite actor. There had been some good

action scenes in it, but nothing like the car chases, explosions, and martial arts fights he preferred to see.

"I'm just afraid that something will happen to ruin things again," Kelly said.

"Nothing will happen," Zack assured her. "I know I made some mistakes in the past, but losing you as my steady girlfriend taught me a lesson. I've learned from the past."

"That is so adult of you, Zack," Kelly murmured.

He rather thought so himself.

"But I'm still not sure if I want to spend all my time with you," she said.

"I'll convince you," Zack declared, and slipped his arm around her waist, drawing her closer so that he could kiss her.

Their lips were a breath apart when they both heard the click of a camera taking a picture.

Kelly and Zack jerked apart.

Behind the bench were two kids. From the leaves, twigs, and dirt on the front of their clothes, it was obvious they'd crawled on their stomachs to sneak up on the teenagers. Although Mr. Knight had introduced each of the campers to the gang earlier, Zack had no idea which of them these two were.

"Don't mind us," the boy said. "Go ahead and kiss." He pulled a Polaroid from his camera and waited for the picture to become clear.

The girl giggled, hiding her mouth behind her hand.

The mood was broken, though. Kelly let go of Zack's hand and slipped away from his side. Hands on her hips, she looked down at the younger kids. "Shame on you two. Don't you know it is impolite to sneak up on people?"

"We were only going to watch," the girl said innocently. "We wanted to see if you kissed like they do on TV."

"We weren't going to kiss," Kelly lied. "We were just talking."

She didn't convince the spies. They looked at each other, rolling their eyes because the older kids thought they were so naive.

Kelly held out her hand to the girl. "Come with me so we can clean you up some. Your mom isn't going to like finding grass stains on the front of your clothes, Melissa."

Although Melissa didn't seem very worried about her mother's reaction, she did scramble to her feet and take Kelly's hand.

"Do you think you can take care of Swaine?" Kelly asked Zack.

"Swaine?" he echoed, but Kelly was already headed for the tent with Melissa in tow.

"Swaine. That's me," the boy said.

Zack was still amazed that Kelly remembered the kids' names. "Swaine," Zack repeated again. "Is that your last name or your first name?"

"Well, it's supposed to be my last name and James is supposed to be my first, but I decided I like them better the other way around."

"So you're Swaine James not James Swaine?"

The boy nodded and crawled onto the rough bench next to Zack. "So were you really going to kiss Erin's sister?"

"Why?" Zack asked, suspicious of his new friend's question.

"'Cause I sure would like to kiss her," Swaine confessed. He looked at the now fully developed picture in his hand. "She's one gorgeous babe."

Zack had to agree with him on that. Kelly was the most beautiful girl in all of Palisades as far as he was concerned.

"You didn't really mean all that stuff about doing whatever she wanted you to do, did you?" Swaine demanded. "You were just saying that, right?"

Had he just been saying it? Scamming to get back together with Kelly?

"No, I meant it," Zack said.

Swaine looked skeptical. "No way," he insisted.

"Way," Zack assured him. "You see, girls really like it when you tell them the truth."

Swaine didn't believe that one, either.

"All right," Zack said. "The truth of the matter is, they really hate you when they find out you've lied to them, and then they get even with you."

Swaine nodded solemnly. "Yeah, they sure do," he agreed. "Like pouring milk over your head in the cafeteria."

"Been there," Zack murmured, his mind going back to a girl named Letitia he'd liked in the third grade. She hadn't liked him as much.

"It's embarrassing," Swaine said. "So how long do you think it will take to trick Kelly into liking you a lot?"

Is that what he was doing? Tricking Kelly so that she'd be his girl again?

"I don't know," Zack admitted with a sigh. "I've been trying everything I can think of. What about you and Melissa?"

Swaine looked toward the girls' tent where Kelly and Melissa had disappeared. "She's a babe," he said, "but she's pretty gullible. She believes everything I tell her, so I don't have to work very hard." Swaine ran a hand back through his hair in a gesture Zack recognized as one he often made himself. He did it now, checking the perfection of his blond hair. "All the chicks like hanging out with me," Swaine added. "'cause I'm a really cool dude. Like you."

Zack got a funny feeling in his chest, as if it were swelling.

"Like me, huh?"

"I want to be just like you, Zack, 'cause of the things I've heard about you," Swaine said.

"From Erin?" Zack figured if Kelly's sister had been talking about him, his name was mud around Ewald Bruiserback Elementary, even if Swaine saw him as a hero figure. He looked at the fifth grader's earnest but dirty face. Of course, maybe the kid liked muddy heroes.

"Naw, I heard my cousin talk about you," Swaine told him. "She's like got this major crush on you."

She? A major crush? Now this sounded good. Real good.

"What's your cousin's name?" Zack asked.

"Tallulah Barato," Swaine answered. "She just moved here from Rio."

"Rio de Janeiro?"

"Rio, Alabama."

Did it matter where Tallulah was from? Zack remembered noticing there was a new member of Bayside's senior class. With her long curly black hair, flashing dark eyes, and bright red mouth, Tallulah looked like an exotic export from South America even if she was only from south North America.

"She's got a crush on me, huh?"

Swaine gave him a man-to-man look. "So, you going to put the move on her?"

"Who? Kelly?"

"No, my cousin."

Zack pushed the vision of Tallulah from his mind. "No way. I don't want to mess things up with Kelly."

Swaine looked thoughtful for a moment. "So why does Kelly have to know? Two babes are better than one."

Well, that was true.

Kelly and Melissa emerged from the tent, laughing together as they strolled off to join the rest of the group.

Reluctantly, Zack pushed away the tempting idea of dating Tallulah Barato when they got back to Palisades. Being with Kelly was better than being with any other girl, no matter how gorgeous she was.

At least, he thought it was.

Just in case things didn't work out as he wanted with Kelly, well, there was always Tallulah to fall back on.

If he even looked at Tallulah now, he'd be in mega, mega, mega hot water with Kelly, though.

Rather than admit to wanting only one girl in his life, Zack decided to turn the conversation away from his conquests. "Two babes, huh? So, who besides Melissa are you romancing?"

"Who else?" Swaine said. "The beautiful Erin Kapowski."

▲ ▼ ▲

Zack was still trying to successfully link the word *beautiful* with Kelly's little sister an hour later. To him Erin was a brat and nothing else. Oh, she had the same dark brown hair as Kelly, but it wasn't as soft or shiny. She had blue eyes but they weren't as gorgeous as Kelly's. And, although Erin had long legs, they weren't shapely like her sister's were. Not yet, anyway.

He'd known Kelly since they were in grade school, though. Had she looked as gangly as Erin back then?

And, if so, how had he ever fallen in love with her?

But he had.

Swaine not only idolized him, the kid was following in his footsteps.

Gosh, that made a guy feel old. Practically ancient! And he wasn't even eighteen yet.

Zack shook his head sadly, wondering how he'd reached this stage in his life. He had just found out a gorgeous girl had a crush on him, that a ten-year-old boy considered him pedestal material to be emulated, and still he felt a bit low.

All because Kelly wasn't his girl.

It was definitely time to work on his poetry. Too bad he couldn't remember any of the lines he'd thought up on the bus ride. All those choruses about bottles of pop on the shelf had probably washed them from his memory.

When I think about her,
I picture her hair.
Because it's the same shade
as that of a wild bear.
At times I'd like to touch it,
but I don't dare.
To do so would catch me fast,
like in a snare.
The length of it reminds me
of the mane of a mare.
If I were a caveman I'd drag her
by it to my lair.
There in our rock home
we'd be quite a happy pair.

All right! This was sounding much better. All he had to do was remember it, rehearse it, find the right moment to deliver it—preferably in the glow of a moonlit sky. Should he quote it to Kelly tonight? The forest would be rustling in the breeze and the sky would be full of highly polished stars, all gleaming

down on them. Or maybe he should save it until they got back to Palisades and they could go to their favorite spot on the beach. The relaxing sound of the waves would lull her, the bright sparkle of the moon on the crests would dazzle her. He had to pick the right time. Had to remember the poem. How had it gone, now? Something about Kelly's hair. Something about a cave.

Darn.

It was gone. He really should write these things down.

Chapter 5

Slater dumped his latest load of firewood near the campfire circle, a cleared area outlined in rocks and surrounded by a second, larger circle of tree stumps and weathered board benches. Everyone had managed to overlook this little detail, disappearing as soon as Mr. Knight mentioned it. Even Mr. Knight had conveniently disappeared, following some of his students down a trail to where a stream bubbled by.

As usual, Zack was nowhere in sight when physical labor needed to be done. Lisa used her recent manicure as an excuse. Jessie explained that someone needed to scout the terrain so that they knew the lay of the land and then she melted into the surroundings as easily as if she were a chameleon.

Screech, of course, was hopeless. The last time Slater had seen his friend, Screech had been tangled in butterfly nets with no hope of escaping anytime soon. And Kelly—

Where was Kelly?

If there was one member of the gang who could be counted on not to shirk their duty on this camping trip, it was Kelly. Yet she was nowhere to be found when chores needed to be done.

Slater wondered if any of them would think to thank him when the sun went down, the temperature dipped, and the campers—big and little—clustered around a roaring fire.

It sure wasn't cold enough for a fire now, of course. The sun beat down through the tall pine trees with only the slightest bit of breeze to cool a guy who had been working hard.

Slater wiped his hand across his forehead, mopping it free of sweat. He rolled his suddenly stiff shoulders.

Nearby, he heard a small sigh of appreciation. Well, all right! There was nothing like a girl admiring a guy's muscle power to make the effort worthwhile. Slater flexed his biceps a bit, and turned with a broad smile to find a fifth grader perched on one of the benches.

Slater's smile faded a bit. He'd forgotten the only teenage girls in the area were Jessie, Lisa, and Kelly.

"You are so strong," his ten-year-old admirer said and gave another sigh, this one bigger and more dreamy sounding than the last.

"Yeah, well . . . ," Slater mumbled. What did you say to a kid this age? He only knew how to talk to older girls.

"You're A. C. Slater, huh? Erin says you play football and stuff and get all sweaty, but I don't mind," the girl said.

"Ah, thanks. I think," Slater said.

"I'm Melissa," she told him. "It means honey bee. Do you have a girlfriend?"

He'd dated Jessie for a long time, but they had always seemed to argue and finally broke up. Then he'd dated Kelly for just a short time, but that hadn't felt right—not when Zack was one of his best friends and obviously still nuts about her—so they broke up too. He'd *had* to date an English student named Clorinda once. Taking her to the Surf's Up Beach Party was payback for helping scam him out of having to go to a school in London. Unfortunately, though, he didn't have a regular girlfriend at the moment.

But, did he want to tell this starry-eyed little girl that? This looked like crush city. While it was nice to be worshiped, he would have preferred a girl his own age doing the worshiping.

"Why? You have an older sister?" Slater asked, hoping she did.

"Nope." She stared up at him, her hands clasped between her knees, her big eyes seeming even bigger as they glowed with happiness just to be near him.

Slater looked around the clearing, wishing some of his friends had returned. The place was empty except for the sound of birds singing in the trees.

"Uh, shouldn't you be with your classmates?" Slater asked, dropping Melissa the hint to leave him alone.

"Nope. They're collecting leaves, trying to catch tadpoles, or exploring."

Like Jessie was exploring rather than doing chores, Slater thought in disgust.

"So, do you?" Melissa demanded.

"Do I what?"

"Have a girlfriend."

There was no way he was going to confess that he wasn't going steady with anybody. Guys who were quarterbacks and captains of wrestling teams never admitted to being babeless. "Sure I do," Slater said.

"Who?" Melissa asked.

"Who?" Slater felt trapped. "Uh . . ."

On the far side of the camp, Jessie stepped out of the trees.

Slater had a brainstorm. "Jessie's my girlfriend," he announced.

Melissa's feet swung back and forth, the toes of

her athletic shoes dragging in the dust. "No, she isn't," she said. "Erin says . . ."

He didn't want to know what Kelly's sister had said. "Erin doesn't know everything," he insisted.

"Yes, she does," Melissa told him. "Just ask her."

When he saw Erin Kapowski, Slater thought, he wasn't going to talk to her. Gag her, maybe, but talk to her? No way.

"Hey! Slater!" Jessie called, striding toward him, her face flushed from her walk, her pretty hazel eyes sparkling, her lips curving in a soft smile.

For a minute, Slater wondered why he'd ever broken up with Jessie. She was really his kind of girl, long-legged and athletic. She was good company, one of his best friends, and gorgeous. Then again, Jessie was also stubborn and liked to have everything her way. If she didn't like something, Jessie turned into a worse scammer than Zack to change it. Just look at the way she'd snuck around trying to find out something bad about her mom's boyfriend when the gang had gone to his dude ranch in New Mexico. Jessie had been so involved in her plot she'd totally forgotten Slater even existed. Who needed a girlfriend like that?

Even so, he liked her better than any other girl he'd ever met.

Melissa was still watching him, adoration on her face.

Slater felt trapped. He turned from Melissa to Jessie, back to Melissa, back to Jessie, then made up his mind.

"See ya later, kid," he told Melissa, and jogged over to Jessie's side. "You gotta help me, momma," Slater pleaded. "Pretend like we're going together, okay?"

Jessie glanced over to where Melissa sat watching them. "What's the matter, Slater? Erin's little friend just ask you to marry her?" she asked, amused at the spot he was in. "I thought you couldn't get enough attention from girls."

"Not ten-year-old ones. Please, Jess?"

"I don't know, Slater. It's a lot to ask of a person. Besides, it's not honest."

"Jess," he pleaded. "I'll do anything you want in exchange for this favor."

"Anything?" Jessie echoed, a calculating look in her eyes.

He was going to regret this later, Slater decided, but at the moment he was desperate. "Anything," he promised.

Jessie smiled. "So, where do we start?"

"Like this," Slater said, and wove his fingers together with hers.

It felt good to be holding hands with Jessie again, he thought. Real good.

▲ ▼ ▲

Inside the girls' tent, Lisa arranged her things and wondered if Mr. Knight was avoiding her. They had barely unloaded the bus when he had wandered off with a bunch of his students, supposedly to collect various types of leaves to study in class when they returned.

It sounded too much like something Lisa had done in her own class to be considered fun.

She didn't blame the kids for trailing after him. She had dated some really great-looking guys, but next to Damon Knight, they were all regular gnomes. Mr. Knight was everything a girl dreamed of when she thought about her own special Prince Charming. He was a knight in shining armor. Sir Damon. Lisa gazed into the distance, picturing herself in a long flowing gown—a soft blue velvet, maybe, or a buttercup yellow satin—with a matching wimple flowing behind her as she moved. She stood on the ramparts of a fairy-tale castle looking out over the landscape, watching for her knight.

And there he was! Riding on a horse of pure white, its long mane and tail streaming back as it galloped across the meadow, he came toward her. His armor reflected the sun like a mirror. The tall plume

in his helmet was the same perfect shade of white as his horse. He carried a long lance, the scarf she had given him— Was it blue? No, yellow—floating like a banner from it.

"My princess," he called up to her.

"My love," Lisa called down to him and held her arms wide. "Come to me!"

Someone tugged on Lisa's sleeve. "Are you doing your nails?" a voice asked. It was certainly not the rich, deep tones of Sir Damon, her dashing knight.

"Huh?" The daydream fizzled away, leaving Lisa with her arms spread wide. She dropped them quickly, realized what the ten-year-old girl at her side had said, and hastily checked the polish she'd put on earlier that morning. "Hmm. It does seem to be just a shade wrong for this outfit, doesn't it?" No wonder Mr. Knight had run off. How could she have made such an error in fashion judgment?

"Looks okay to me," the fifth grader said.

"No, no. Believe me, it's all wrong," Lisa insisted. "This is Tahiti Sunset Blush when Kiss of Dawn is far more appropriate. Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Melissa and you're Erin's sister Kelly's friend Lisa."

"Right," Lisa said, and looked at her visitor from straight light brown hair to pastel T-shirt to shorts, scraped knee, and sneakers and gasped. "My gosh! Do you know that color is all wrong for you?"

Melissa stared at her in surprise. "What color?"

Lisa grabbed up the girl's hand. "This nail polish," she exclaimed. "It's all wrong with that shirt. You need a softer pink, something with a touch of pearl in it."

"I do?" Melissa asked, bewildered.

"Absolutely. And you are in major need of a manicure. Look at those cuticles!" Lisa clucked her tongue in disapproval. "Hands are very important to a well-groomed girl, you know."

"Really?"

"Have a seat," Lisa urged, waving at one of the adjacent cots. She pulled her loaded cosmetics bag onto her lap and started riffling through it. "I think I've got a shade of nail polish in here that's just right for that outfit. South Seas Coral Sherbert. I heard the manufacturer was discontinuing it, and I was in a real panic. I mean, it goes so perfectly with so many of my outfits. But it was just a rumor. They stopped making Glazed Alaskan Salmon, which was fine with me. It just wasn't as great a color. You know what I mean?"

Melissa first nodded her head yes, then shook it no.

"Well, I'm sure you'd know if you'd found out everyone was sold out of South Seas Coral Sherbert and had to try to make do with Glazed Alaskan Salmon," Lisa said. "The day I wore it was so bad. I just knew everyone was staring at me all day long. In

fact, I think Timothy Tilden broke our date because he couldn't stand to be seen with a girl whose nails were so glaringly wrong."

"Boys notice nail polish?" Melissa asked, finally showing a hint of interest.

"Absolutely," Lisa declared. "They love girls who wear it. Especially if they paint their toenails."

"They do?"

Lisa looked up from her search. "It drives them nuts," she said with a smile.

"All of them?" Melissa persisted. "No matter what?"

"All of them," Lisa assured her.

"Even . . . um . . ."

"*All* of them," Lisa said, her voice making the statement final.

Melissa grinned at her and held out her hands. "Then could you show me?" she asked.

"I thought you'd never ask," Lisa said, and got to work.

Chapter 6

▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

"Boys are so dumb," Erin Kapowski said.

Well, really, she'd shouted it, Zack decided, when Erin's voice began echoing back over the campsite from the nearby cliff face.

"Are not," Swaine insisted, almost as loudly.

"Are, too."

"Are not."

Erin's stance, legs apart, hands clenched into fists, foretold of disaster. Any minute now she was going to take a swing at Swaine and either blacken his eye or bloody his nose. Swaine was unaware of the danger. He stood right in front of Erin, his chin raised as if daring her to pop him one.

In Swaine's case, Zack was willing to side with

Erin. This particular boy actually did seem kind of dumb.

"Zack could do it," Swaine said.

Zack gulped at the sound of his name. Just the proud way Swaine used it told Zack that being the boy's idol would get him in hot water.

"Zack?" Erin repeated, then pealed with laughter. "No way."

Zack could almost see the water boiling, and it wasn't in a small pot, either. It was a cauldron big enough to make Zachary Morris soup for a whole tribe of cannibals!

He needed help and he needed it fast!

Zack looked around the campground for Mr. Knight, but he was nowhere to be found. Wasn't that just like an adult? Never there when you really needed them.

None of his friends was in sight, either. Where had they all disappeared to? How could they desert him at a time like this? Slater could handle the kids. He'd flex his muscles and they'd behave. Jessie could deal with them. She liked being in charge of things. Kelly could . . .

Kelly.

This was his chance to impress her, to show what a mature and responsible guy he was by settling an argument between the younger kids.

Besides, if he didn't stop the fight, Kelly would blame him for not keeping her sister out of trouble.

Zack dashed over to stop the two combatants. The argument had drawn the attention of the rest of the fifth graders so that the boys were gathering around Swaine while the girls massed behind Erin.

"Hey! What's the problem?" Zack demanded, trying to sound in control. He was supposed to be a chaperon on this trip.

Swaine glared at Erin. "She says boys can't do all the things that girls do," he said.

"They can't," Erin insisted, sure of herself in this matter.

"Can."

"Whoa! Hold it!" Zack said. He stepped between the two battling ten-year-olds just in case Erin decided to punch Swaine. "There are some things boys do better than girls and some things girls do better than boys. For instance, boys are stronger and can protect girls."

Erin looked at him in disgust, then back over her shoulder at her schoolmates. "Angelique?"

A delicate-looking girl with long blond curls stepped forward and took Zack's hand.

He was just thinking how much like an angel she looked when suddenly he was flying through the air. When he finally hit the ground and the world

stopped spinning in crazy circles, Zack found himself lying flat on his back. Staring up he saw, first, the sky, then the interested faces of the kids as they peered down at him.

"Angelique takes karate lessons," Erin said. "She doesn't need any dumb boy to protect her."

Zack shook his head to get rid of the bells that kept ringing inside it. "Guess not," he murmured.

"Erin says boys can't cook," Swaine informed him.

Well, this sounded like a safer subject, Zack thought. After all, there were facts to back him up on this one. "Sure they can. There are a lot of very famous chefs who are guys. They not only cook, they invent new recipes."

Erin looked unconvinced. "They do not," she growled. "And if they do, I'll bet it was really their mothers who invented them and they just said they did." The girls behind her all nodded, agreeing with their leader.

Zack found all the boys staring at him, waiting for him to set Erin straight.

Zack got back to his feet and brushed the dirt off his jeans. He kept a close eye on Angelique, so she couldn't sneak up on him.

"When we get back to Palisades you can watch Chef Oscar's show on Channel 17 if you don't believe me," he told Erin. "I once saw a show where he said

he learned to cook because his mother only knew how to make peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches."

One of the boys looked excited. "I can make those," he announced. "Does that mean I can cook?"

"Sure," Zack said. "I can do those and make burgers and submarine sandwiches, too."

The boys looked impressed.

"And frozen pizza in the microwave is a cinch," he told them proudly.

"That's not cooking," Erin said.

"Is, too," Swaine declared, jumping to Zack's defense.

"Hey. No more fighting, okay? We're here to have fun," Zack reminded them. "Just trust me about the chefs, Erin, and everybody can go do some fun camping kind of stuff."

"Like what?" Erin asked.

Well, stuff, Zack thought. He'd only been camping once before and that had been with Screech. It had taken them forever to get the tent put up, but they'd no sooner crawled inside than it collapsed on their heads. Zack hadn't felt much like camping since then.

He searched his mind for something to suggest to the expectant kids. "Uh, how about finding some wildflowers to smell?"

"Can't," one of the boys said. "I'm allergic to them."

"Me, too," a couple of the other kids piped up.

"Gather wood for the campfire."

"Slater already did that," Erin pointed out.

"Oh, then collect rocks," Zack said.

"Why?" Angelique asked.

"Just to collect them because you think they're pretty," Zack suggested.

She shook her head at the idea. "I already collect dolls and they are a lot prettier than a bunch of dumb old rocks," she told him.

"I'm not gonna collect any rocks, either," a boy said, "especially if they're pretty. Boys don't collect stuff that's pretty."

"That's stupid," Erin declared with a sneer.

"Is not," Swaine said.

"Is so."

Zack put his hand over Swaine's mouth before he could goad Erin again. "Quiet!" Zack shouted.

The kids all looked at him as if he were nuts.

"What do I have to do to get you all to get along?" Zack demanded.

"Umm . . . ," Erin murmured, thinking a moment before she came to a decision.

Zack knew he wasn't going to like it when he heard it.

"You could prove that boys can cook," Erin announced.

"Yeah," Angelique and the other girls said.

Zack sighed. "How am I supposed to do that? Go find a TV so we can watch Chef Oscar? I don't think his show is on today."

"Nope," Erin said, shaking her head. Her ponytail swished back and forth just like Kelly's always did. If he wasn't so set on winning Kelly back, Zack thought, he would just threaten to tell Mr. Knight about her bratty behavior. But he did want Kelly to be his girlfriend again, so he had to be nice to her little sister.

Even if it killed him.

"What do I have to do?" Zack asked in resignation.

"Cook," Erin announced.

"Yeah," the girls all said. The trouble was, Zack heard some of the boys echo the word with relish. They were sure he would show Erin and her gang up.

"When?" Zack asked.

"Now," Erin said. "You can be the chef while we're camping."

Hmm . . . How tough could it be? There was only one dinner. He could make hot dogs over a campfire. There was only one lunch—hot dogs over a campfire. There was only one breakfast—hot dogs . . . well, maybe just hot dog buns warmed over a campfire. He'd call it toast.

"Okay," Zack said. "I'll do it."

The boys cheered.

Erin held out her hand. "Shake on it?"

"Shake on it," Zack agreed, and took her hand. The next thing he knew, he was lying on his back in the dirt again with Erin grinning down at him. All the girls were giggling.

"Oh, didn't Kelly tell you? Angelique taught me some of her karate," Erin said.

▲ ▼ ▲

After Zack picked himself up off the ground the second time, his friends materialized from the woods, asking if he was all right and what he'd done to have little girls beating up on him. Zack told them his sad story and gave them his most pathetic look. "You've got to help me, gang."

"Cook over an open campfire?" Lisa said. "I don't think so. Do you know what would happen to my complexion? It would take a month of daily mud packs to fix it."

"I can't help you," Jessie declared. "I promised Mr. Knight I'd help him take the kids on a long hike right after lunch."

Lunch. Zack groaned and looked at Kelly.

She patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Zack. Mr. Knight brought a dozen foot-long submarine sandwiches along so there would be no cooking to be done until suppertime."

A dozen foot-long subs. That was twelve times

twelve inches. One hundred and forty-four inches of sandwich. Hey! Math did come in handy for something! Divide that by three teenage boys and a male teacher in his twenties, all who would need two subs apiece to keep up their strength, and there was only about forty-eight inches of sub left. After Kelly, Jessie, Lisa, and each of the twelve ten-year-olds ate their three inches of sandwich, would there be any leftovers he could use for dinner?

Probably not.

Boy, was he in trouble.

"You'll do fine, Zack," Kelly said.

Ah, Kelly! She'd be by his side. Maybe she'd even take over the cooking chore. Of course, it would have to be while Erin and her buddies weren't looking so he could maintain his status as Swaine's idol.

"I wish I could help you, Zack," Kelly said.

She *wished* she could help? This didn't sound very good.

"But that wouldn't be fair," Kelly continued. "To prove boys can cook, you can't have any girls assisting you. Besides, I already promised Mr. Knight I'd help with the kids on the hike."

"I'm going with them, too," Lisa said. "But Slater and Screech aren't, so they can help you."

"What a great idea!" Jessie cried.

Slater shivered with disgust at the suggestion. "No, it isn't," he said.

"Oh, but it is," Jessie insisted. "Think about it. If a Neanderthal like Slater can cook, that will definitely prove to the kids that men can work in the kitchen."

"Wait a minute, momma. We Neanderthals invented fire just so our women folk could handle the cooking detail," Slater said.

"So tend the fire," Jessie suggested. "Zack can burn the food."

Slater frowned. He'd been thinking how nice it might be to get back together with Jessie. Now he wasn't so sure.

"Well, you know I can cook," Screech said, "although I will admit a few of my culinary experiments went a bit wrong."

"Don't remind me," Lisa pleaded, making a face. She heard Mr. Monza, the head of maintenance at Bayside, still had nightmares about the day Screech had tried to make marshmallow burritos in the home ec room.

"You guys need to help me," Zack pleaded. "I can't cook for nineteen people alone."

"Sorry, Zack," Jessie said, "but I have a prior commitment."

"I'm with her," Lisa hastened to add.

"You can do it, Zack," Kelly insisted. She gave him a bright, happy smile, but it didn't work the kind of magic he needed at the moment. "I know that

Slater and Screech will stand by you," she assured him.

"You can count on me," Screech said, and gave a snappy salute. He poked himself in the eye.

"Slater?" Kelly asked when he didn't volunteer.

Slater shuffled a foot in the dirt. He looked across the clearing toward the tents.

"Slater," Jessie said, a hint of disappointment in her voice over his reluctance.

Slater shoved his hands in his pockets and watched a hawk soar overhead.

"*Slater!*" Jessie, Kelly, and Lisa snapped in unison.

"Okay, okay!" he mumbled, caving in as they ganged up on him.

Zack clasped him on the shoulder. "Thanks, pal."

"I'm probably going to regret this," Slater said.

"We all are," Zack said.

"I think it'll be fun," Screech insisted. "Cooking over an open fire, the smoke in our eyes, the smell of burning wood in our noses . . ."

"The heat of white coals on a warm, sunny day," Slater said, far from enthusiastic.

"Well, it can't be all that bad," Zack told them. "We just get out the toasting forks . . ."

"Uh, Zack?" Kelly said. "We didn't bring toasting forks."

He only looked worried for an instant. "Oh, right.

We are camping in the mountains. Plenty of trees. We can find sticks to whittle down and use as toasting forks. Far more rustic. The hot dogs will do fine on them, too."

Slater looked a little more interested. "Sounds good to me. My dad and I did that once when we went camping. Of course, we need to use green wood so it won't burn, but I think we can find enough on the ground."

"Uh, Slater? You don't have to worry about finding any sticks," Kelly said.

"Of course we do," Zack insisted. "How else are we going to fix the hot dogs?"

Kelly looked uneasy. "The cafeteria at the elementary school supplied all the food. Jessie and I helped pack it, so I know we didn't bring any hot dogs," she confessed.

"They're full of chemicals, you know," Jessie reminded them.

"Eww. I didn't know that," Lisa said.

"I did," Screech said. "They're really quite tasty chemicals."

Zack stared at Kelly, his mouth hanging open a bit in shock. "No hot dogs?"

"Everybody brings hot dogs along on a camping trip," Slater insisted.

"Not everybody. We didn't," Jessie said.

Zack sighed. "Well, I suppose we can handle

burgers, too. Maybe there's a grill in the bus. If not, we'll make one by balancing that green wood of Slater's on some rocks."

Kelly cleared her throat apologetically.

"Don't tell me," Zack pleaded. "No burgers, either?"

"Too much fat and, besides, red meat isn't good for you," Jessie explained.

"Let me get this straight," Zack said. "We're on a camping trip, but we don't have any hot dogs or burgers to eat? What do we have?"

"Lots of things," Kelly assured him.

"Like what?"

"Chicken, spices, fresh vegetables, dried fruit . . ."

Zack and Slater groaned.

"Mmm," Screech said, licking his lips. "What else? You didn't forget the marshmallows, did you?"

The girls looked at each other.

"Marshmallows?" Kelly asked.

"Too sticky," Lisa said.

"They aren't in a basic food group," Jessie added. "We needed to consider the children's nutritional needs, you know."

Zack dropped down to sit on one of the rough benches. He put his head in his hands and moaned. "I'm doomed."

"We're doomed," Slater corrected.

"You'll do fine," Kelly soothed. "I know you will."

Zack looked up. "We've got no hot dogs, no burgers, and no marshmallows. The next thing you'll tell me is that we don't have any matches."

Kelly's eyes widened. She looked at Jessie and Lisa. "Matches?" she repeated.

"Darn!" Jessie murmured. "I knew we'd forgotten something."

Chapter 7

▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

Slater knelt in the middle of the circle of stones, arranging the wood he'd collected earlier into a teepee-shaped pile. Zack had gone off to where Mr. Knight had parked the school bus down by the road to get some of the food. Screech sat cross-legged on the ground near the fire circle, a stick of wood in each hand, rubbing them against each other as fast as he could. Across the clearing, Mr. Knight was dividing up his students into smaller groups, putting Kelly, Jessie, and Lisa each in charge of one. All the fifth graders milled about near their teacher except for one.

Angelique stood watching as Screech worked, trying to start a fire with his pair of sticks. "That isn't the way you do it," she said.

"It isn't?" Screech asked, his voice rising to a squeak. "I was sure it was. You see, I once saw this movie, *Attack of the Bramble People*—they had arms like long branches and were covered with really nasty thorns. I couldn't go near my mother's rosebushes for weeks after I saw it. Anyway, the only way to defeat the Bramble People was to build a fire, only none of the humans had matches, so they used sticks."

"I saw it," Angelique said. "And nobody could get a fire started in the movie that way, either. Lightning struck a dead tree and set it on fire. That's how they got rid of the Bramble People."

"Golly! You're right!" Screech admitted. He looked at the sky, craning his neck around, looking for a convenient storm cloud.

The sky was a pretty blue with just a few puffy white clouds dotting it.

"I'd help you," Angelique said, "but Mr. Knight says I have to go hiking with the class."

"That's okay," Screech assured her. "All I need now is a bolt of lightning. If I remember it right, I can do the rain dance of the Hacka-cuka-naki tribe. They live in the center of a rain forest and get worried if it stops raining."

"I don't know," Angelique murmured uncertainly. "I watched it on a documentary on television last week, so it's pretty fresh in my mind."

Angelique still looked dubious at the prospect.

"Besides," Screech said, "I can teach it to Zack and Slater so we triple the power of the dance, although"—he looked thoughtful—"there are some pretty complicated steps to learn. Was that two hops to the right, spin in a circle, stand on one leg, and jump forward? Or was it walk like a crab with a sore foot for seven paces then dance backward while holding your big toe? Oh, well, I'm sure I'll remember it so we can practice. Have fun hiking."

"I think I'll look for some wild berries to eat just in case your dance doesn't work," Angelique said.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Screech warned. "They grow in brambles and may be related to those weird Bramble People."

Angelique tossed her blond hair over her narrow shoulders. "Oh, I don't think they were so weird," she told him. "At least, I don't since I met you."

"Why, thank you," Screech said, taking the comment as a compliment.

Angelique scampered off to join her classmates as Slater finished arranging the wood.

"She's right," he said. "You'll never get a fire going rubbing those sticks together that way, Screech."

"That's okay. Once I remember the exact steps to the rain dance . . ."

"I'm not dancing," Slater growled. "Let me show you a better way to start a fire."

Screech slapped the palm of his hand against his forehead. "How could I forget? You use rocks. I forget what kind but—"

"Flint. You could," Slater said. "I thought I'd use this instead." He fished in the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a lighter. "Dad suggested I treat this trip like survival training, considering who I was camping with. So I brought along my own supplies."

He flicked the lighter and soon had a flame burning among the bits of tinder and licking at the larger pieces of wood.

Zack staggered back into camp, his arms loaded down with grocery bags. "Hey! How'd you get a fire going?"

Slater threw Screech a look that told him to keep quiet and quickly pocketed his lighter. "Rubbed a couple of sticks together, how else?"

▲ ▼ ▲

There were two paths leading away from the campsite. Mr. Knight chose the one that looked most trafficked and led the way, his students trailing behind like a line of little ducklings. Kelly, Jessie, and Lisa brought up the rear.

"I'm worried," Kelly whispered to her friends.

"Why? It's a well-marked path," Jessie said. "I checked it out earlier. There's nothing rough about it."

"And Damon knows what he's doing," Lisa added.

Kelly and Jessie both looked at her. "*Damon?*"

Lisa sighed dreamily. "Isn't that a romantic-sounding name? And he's so handsome."

"Yeah, he is," Kelly agreed.

Mr. Knight glanced back over his shoulder at them. "Don't get lost, girls," he called, and flashed a devastating smile.

Jessie sighed happily this time. "He sure is gorgeous."

"It's too bad he has such a major flaw," Lisa said.

"A flaw?" Jessie echoed.

"Major?" Kelly whispered, as if she were repeating a secret too dreadful to say aloud.

"Mega major," Lisa said.

"Is that what you're worried about?" Jessie asked Kelly.

"No!" Kelly looked startled at the idea. "I didn't even know! I was thinking about the guys trying to cook dinner."

Lisa nodded in agreement. "I'd be more worried if I hadn't hidden one of the submarine sandwiches in my cosmetics bag so I could eat it later tonight."

"You did?" Kelly was astounded.

"Hey, I am not taking any chances with my dinner," Lisa insisted. "I've seen Screech's idea of cooking, girlfriend, and it's not a pretty sight, let me tell you."

"Well, at least he isn't totally in charge of the meal," Jessie said. "Zack and Slater can't be that bad."

"You're sure?" Kelly asked, a slight frown creasing her forehead.

"No, but we brought along plenty of dried fruit and raw vegetables, so we'll survive," Jessie assured her before turning back to Lisa. "So, what's this horrible flaw of Mr. Knight's?" she demanded, dropping her voice to a whisper so that the fifth graders ahead of them didn't hear.

"You won't believe it," Lisa said. "He wants to be a principal."

Kelly and Jessie both shuddered.

"Who would have thought it?" Kelly murmured.

"I thought only balding guys like Mr. Belding wanted to be principals, not great-looking ones like Mr. Knight," Jessie said.

"Yeah," Lisa agreed and sighed sadly. "Such a waste."

"I'll say," Jessie agreed.

"Still, he isn't one yet," Lisa said.

"True."

"And he is awfully gorgeous," Kelly reminded them.

All three girls sighed as they gazed at the young teacher.

"Hey, watch it there," he called to one of the boys as he ran ahead of the rest. "The hill is pretty steep and you could fall."

"He's more than just gorgeous," Jessie said. "He's a caring person."

"He's really good with the kids," Kelly added. "Erin adores him. All the kids do."

"Darn," Lisa mumbled. "I forgot to ask him if he's dating anybody right now. Since I'm not—"

"Neither am I," Jessie said.

"Or me," Kelly said.

"Yes, you are," Lisa declared. "You and Zack have been seeing each other a lot lately."

"He took you to see Mitch Tobias's new movie," Jessie reminded her. "That's pretty serious, if you ask me."

"I know, but—"

"But nothing, girl," Lisa said. "You told me you had a great time. That Zack was acting different."

"More like he cared only about you," Jessie said.

"I know, but—"

"You've always been nuts about Zack," Jessie continued.

"I know, but—"

"You'll never know if he has changed if you don't give him a chance," Lisa said.

"I know—" Kelly began.

"You know, *but*," Jessie and Lisa chanted together.

Kelly giggled. "You just don't want me to be available to date Mr. Knight."

"Would he ask you?" Lisa asked.

Kelly shrugged. "I don't know."

Jessie chewed her lip in thought. "He is more likely to date Kelly because he knows her the best. And she did find volunteers so he could take the class on this trip."

"True," Lisa admitted. "Although I wouldn't have volunteered if I hadn't seen what he looked like."

"Mr. Knight isn't going to ask me for a date, you guys. He thinks of me as Erin's sister."

"Her older sister."

"Her gorgeous older sister."

"You know," Lisa said. "I think the only reason Zack volunteered to come along was to make sure Kelly didn't spend time with another guy."

"Don't be silly," Kelly insisted.

"It's the truth," Lisa told her. "He was staking out his territory."

"It's the old Neanderthal thinking," Jessie said. "He figured he had to follow you and warn others away from his property."

"*Property!*" Kelly squeaked. "I'm no guy's property."

"Tell that to Zack," Lisa suggested.

"He'll deny it, of course," Jessie said, "but that doesn't mean it isn't true."

Kelly's chin raised. "Well, maybe I'll just date Mr. Knight to show Zack he doesn't own me."

"Well, if that's what you want, but then I think you should stop calling him Mr. Knight," Jessie suggested.

"He's *Damon*," Lisa reminded, drawing the teacher's first name out. Day-monnnn.

"Damon," Kelly repeated and nodded her head as if she'd made a decision.

"I wonder if he writes love poems for the girls he dates?" Jessie said. "Wouldn't it be great to have a guy do that?"

"Yeah," Kelly agreed with a romantic-sounding sigh. "That would be really great."

▲ ▼ ▲

Back at the campground, Zack sat peeling a potato. The only utensils he had been able to find were spoons, but Slater had pulled a Swiss Army knife out of his pocket and handed it over to Zack. Besides the regular blade, it had a screwdriver, a corkscrew, a small scissors, a bottle opener, and a can opener. The last one had come in handy when they needed to open the large cans of fruit juice Zack had found on the bus.

Slater was busy stoking the fire while Screech turned the makeshift spit they had made with branches. Since Zack had gotten them into this spot, Slater insisted that it was Zack who should handle most of the KP duties.

Slowly—because he'd cut himself once already—Zack worked on making a long curl of potato peel with his hands, and on a new poem for Kelly in his mind.

The first time I saw you,
I was just a little kid.
It was love at first sight,
So I made my first bid.
To make you my girl, of other guys
You needed to be rid.
'Cause if you weren't,
I knew I was gonna flip my lid.
Once they were gone, though,
My feelings I no longer hid.
So, Kelly Kapowski, could you
Love me again, like you once before did?

This poem, Zack vowed, he wasn't going to forget.

Chapter 8

▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

Mr. Knight stood on an outcropping of rock and watched the kids in his class clamber about as they explored. Seeing that everyone was obeying the safety rules he'd laid down, he climbed down and took a seat on a sun-warmed chunk of granite near where Kelly, Jessie, and Lisa were resting.

"Time to come clean," he told them, flashing one of his breathtaking smiles. "What were you girls whispering about during our hike?"

"Lots of things," Kelly said.

"Like whether we'll starve to death with the guys in charge of food preparation," Jessie added.

Lisa cut to the truth of the matter. "We were talking about you," she told him.

"Me?" Mr. Knight looked amused.

"Well, yes," Kelly admitted.

"I'm really interested in your poetry, Mr. Knight," Jessie said.

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "How did you know I write poetry?"

"I've read some of it in magazines," Jessie explained.

"Very obscure magazines," Mr. Knight said. "There aren't many that publish poetry, but I keep trying my hand at it, anyway. But, please, girls, call me Damon. Having three beautiful young women call me Mr. Knight makes me feel ancient, and I'm not that much older than any of you are. Six or seven years, tops."

The girls exchanged excited smiles. He thought they were beautiful!

"It's hard to remember you're so young when you've done so many things already," Kelly said.

Damon chuckled. "You mean all those football awards? Believe me, I'm glad that's all behind me now."

"So, besides teaching, you just write poetry now?" Lisa asked.

"Not as much as I'd like to."

"I've never met a poet before," Kelly said. "How old were you when you wrote your first poem?"

"Oh, about your age. It was pretty bad, too, but I still remember every horrible line of it. I was so

proud, I quoted it to everyone I met. Amazingly, some of them stayed friends with me," he said with a laugh.

"It couldn't have been that bad," Jessie insisted.

"Oh, yes, it could. When I wrote it, I thought all poetry had to rhyme. It took a college course to set me right," Damon said.

"Tell us one of your newest poems. Please?" Lisa fluttered her eyelashes at him.

Damon shook his head. "I'm sorry, Lisa, but I can't do that. I've been writing them for my fiancée and Linda's the only person I share them with. They're personal for us. I hope you understand."

"Oh, sure," Lisa hastened to assure him. She rolled her eyes at Kelly and Jessie. Both of them understood. He had a fiancée! So much for all their fantasies about dating him.

"Linda wanted to come with us this weekend, but her schedule at school didn't allow for spare time just now," Damon explained. "Once she graduates and has a teaching job of her own, we'll be able to spend more time together."

"I know you said it was bad, Damon," Kelly said, "but I'd really like to hear that first poem you wrote."

He grinned at her. "Okay, but only if you all promise you won't run off screaming down the trail when I'm done."

The girls all giggled. "We promise," Jessie said.

Damon cleared his voice and stood up. "Remember, you asked for it," he warned them, then began.

"When it comes to the decision
on which girl to woo,
Most guys haven't the foggiest clue.
They want a girl who is lovely,
as fresh as the dew,
Who will stick to her steady
with the fastness of glue.
I knew a guy like that,
let's call him Lou,
Who fell hard for a girl
by the sweet name of Sue.
One day he fell ill
with a bad case of flu,
And the next thing he knew,
Sue was off to the zoo,
Where she met a big fellow
while she looked at the view.
Thinking he'd lost her
made poor Lou quite blue.
Sue had a new steady
but he didn't know who.
The day he became ill
he had quite begun to rue,

When he heard a slight sound,
something quite like a mew.
Lou listened a while and,
on his lip, he did chew.
And if you were in his shoes,
that's just what you'd do.
He gripped the door handle
while he counted to two,
Pulled it open and there stood
Sue with a kitten quite new.
Her eyes they were shining,
a quite pretty blue.
She handed him the kitten
and said, 'She's for you.'
The moral of my story
isn't really very new.
When you're in love with someone
be true blue like Sue."

When he had finished, Damon bowed, then sat back down. The girls laughed and applauded.

"I don't think it's *that* bad," Lisa told him.

"Thank you," Damon said, his eyes dancing with laughter.

"And it did have a nice story in it," Kelly added.

"Plus a moral. I like that," Jessie said.

Kelly wrinkled her nose. "That part I'm not so sure about," she declared. "It sounded too much like a message for me."

Damon looked at her, his expression serious and concerned now. "How so?"

Kelly glanced at her two friends then back at him. "Well, Zack and I have been sort of going together off and on."

"Sometimes more off," Jessie said.

"Sometimes more on," Lisa clarified.

"And sometimes, like now, I don't know which it is," Kelly confessed. "I mean, do I love him, or don't I? Should I be 'true blue like Sue,' or would that be really dumb?"

"Not an easy decision to make," Damon agreed. "But you're the only one who can decide what is best for you, Kelly."

Kelly sighed deeply. "I know. It's really depressing sometimes."

"Been there," Damon said.

Lisa's eyes widened. "You're kidding! *You* had a problem with a girl?"

"Where do you think I got the idea for that really bad poem?" Damon asked.

"What did you do?" Jessie demanded. "I mean, I sort of have a similar problem. Slater and I . . . well, we used to . . . but . . . and now . . . yet I'm not sure if he really meant . . ."

Lisa's mouth dropped open. "You and Slater are getting back together?"

Jessie shrugged. "I don't know. He was super nice to me earlier, acting like I was someone very special to him. Then he stopped, so I don't know what to think."

"Boy!" Lisa exclaimed. "Am I ever glad I came with you guys this weekend. I would have missed everything of importance!"

"It probably isn't important," Jessie said.

"Yes, it is," Kelly told her, and turned to Damon. "Maybe you can help us figure out the way guys think so we aren't so confused."

He chuckled. "I don't think I can do that."

"Oh, right," Jessie murmured. "Guys probably make some kind of pact not to tell girls their secrets."

"Not quite," Damon said. "I think Mother Nature likes to keep us all confused. There isn't a single guy in the world who can figure out what a girl means or thinks."

"So you're saying even if you told us, we wouldn't understand what you were saying?" Jessie asked.

"Something like that."

All the girls sighed deeply.

"So what do we do?" Kelly demanded.

"You want my opinion?"

When Kelly nodded, Damon looked honored. "Just hang in there. The guys will let you know what the score is soon. They might surprise you by doing something very special for you."

"Like the poetry you write for your fiancée," Lisa said.

Damon shrugged and got to his feet. "Could be that. Could be something else. Guess we'd better check on the kids. They've been on their own long enough."

As he walked away from them, Kelly, Jessie, and Lisa stared at each other.

"He wasn't much help, was he?" Lisa said.

"No. I can't see Zack doing anything special unless he's scamming something," Kelly mumbled sadly.

"And Slater would rather eat worms than recite poetry," Jessie said.

"True," Lisa agreed thoughtfully. "But I'll bet Zack might write Kelly a poem."

"Only if someone suggested it to him," Kelly said. "And that wouldn't be quite the same as having him decide to write one on his own."

"Hmm . . . Does that mean you don't want me to plant the idea in his mind?" Lisa asked. "Because I could do it, if you wanted me to."

"Yes. No. Oh, I don't know," Kelly admitted. "I'd really love to have someone write something special and private just for me. Like Damon does for his fiancée. I think it's so romantic that he won't quote the poems he writes for her to anyone else."

"Especially not to other girls," Jessie pointed out.

"Yeah," Kelly said, and sighed deeply again before turning to Jessie. "So tell us what happened with you and Slater."

"We want *all* the details," Lisa insisted.

"It wasn't romantic," Jessie said. "It was more weird."

Kelly and Lisa leaned forward eagerly.

"I'd just come back from a walk. I wanted to look over the area near the campsite so I'd find out what was where, you know? Well, Slater hurried over to me and asked me to pretend like we were still going together. He claimed it was to get this little girl to stop flirting with him. Can you believe that one?"

"Sure," Lisa said, nodding her head. "I've been flirting with guys since I was ten years old."

"Did you flirt with teenaged boys then?"

Lisa thought a moment. "Simon Schuster," she announced. "He was fourteen and so gorgeous I couldn't stop myself from following him around."

"What did he do?" Kelly asked.

"Moved," Lisa said. "All the way to Chicago. I was brokenhearted for a week."

"Well, I don't think Slater is planning on moving. Besides, Simon was only four years older than you, Lisa, and Slater is seven years older than Melissa. That's a big difference," Jessie pointed out.

"Yeah, just as Damon is six or seven years older than us," Kelly said.

"Whoops. And we were all ready to date him if he asked, weren't we?" Jessie said.

"Really ready," Lisa agreed. "So what else did Slater do?"

"Well, he said he'd do anything I wanted if I'd act like we were still going together, and then he held my hand and looked at me as if he really were in love with me," Jessie explained.

"Gosh!"

"In fact, when he first ran over to me, he looked like he was glad to see me for myself, not just because he needed rescuing from Melissa," she said.

"Wow!" Kelly murmured.

"That is weird," Lisa agreed. "But maybe—wait a minute. What's the little girl's name?"

"Melissa."

"Eww. Then you'd better stick close to Slater, girlfriend," Lisa counseled.

"Why?"

"Because I . . . er . . ." Lisa swallowed and looked uncomfortable. "I sort of told her how to get a boy's attention, painted her nails, fixed her hair . . ."

Kelly and Jessie burst into laughter. "Oh no."

"Oh yes," Lisa said, starting to giggle herself. "So, I think Slater will be too busy to confuse you anymore on this trip, Jessie. Maybe you can get him on the rebound once we're back in Palisades and Melissa goes after some new boy."

Jessie tossed her long curly hair back over her shoulder. "Who needs him?"

"Uh, you do?" Kelly suggested softly.

Jessie sighed. "Yeah," she agreed quietly. "I do."

Chapter 9

▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

Damon and the girls were gathering the fifth graders together for the hike back to camp when disaster struck.

Swaine had been cocky, taking any dare and seeing it through to a successful end, no matter how dangerous it was. He'd scrambled up steep rock surfaces, climbed into a tall tree, and nearly eaten a bug. It had escaped before he managed to get it into his mouth. But now came the final test.

Kelly thought the mountain meadow in which they had rested was one of the prettiest places she had ever seen. The trail wound its way in a twisting, gradual incline up to the clearing. While the mountain continued to rise above them, at the far side of the meadow it dipped toward the valley below. The

view was spectacular and wildly artistic. She particularly liked the way a single pine tree grew a few feet down the slope, looking more like it was sliding downhill than actually growing at a tilted angle. The branches were laden with pine cones.

Her enjoyment of the scene was interrupted by a fresh squabble among some of the ten-year-olds. She wasn't surprised to find her little sister at the center of it.

"Can not," Erin and her friend, Angelique, insisted in unison.

"Can, too," Swaine declared stoutly.

"You're too chicken to get that close," Erin said.

"Am not," he said, and glanced to where Damon stood talking to another of the students. Apparently sure that he would encounter no interference from the teacher, Swaine turned back to his two classmates. "I'll show you by getting you one," he told them.

One what? Kelly wondered.

Without waiting to see if he had impressed Erin and Angelique, Swaine slipped out of line and over to the very edge of the dangerous downward slope.

Oh, my gosh! "Damon!" Kelly shouted, and gestured wildly to where Swaine now stood, his toes off the drop as he reached for a pine cone.

Damon took off at a run a second after Kelly did. His longer legs, and years of running the length of a football field, put him at the ledge before her, though. He was just in time to grab Swaine as the boy started to fall forward. But in yanking Swaine to safety, Damon leaned too far and pitched forward over the edge.

Kelly had her arms wrapped around Swaine and her mouth open in a silent scream when Jessie, Lisa, and the rest of the fifth graders rushed up.

Jessie snapped an order at the younger kids to stay far back while she inched forward to see if Damon was okay.

She breathed a big sigh of relief when she saw him dangling from one of the lower branches of the pine tree. "He's all right," she called back to the others. "Do you need help, Damon? We could form a human chain."

"Just keep the kids back, Jessie," he called. "I'm going to let go and drop into the plants that are growing beneath the tree. They should cushion my fall; then I'll scramble back up."

Jessie glanced at the plants. He was right. There were so many of the climbing tendrils spread across the ground, his landing would be nice and soft. She couldn't remember having seen other plants like this one around the area, though, and she had walked a good bit of it on her own as well as with the class. Something about it was familiar. It reminded her more of plants she'd seen on a visit to relatives in

Ohio once. The leaves had three points and there were some white berries scattered in the wild tangle.

Golly! It couldn't be!

"Damon, don't drop!" Jessie yelled.

It was too late. He'd already let go. He landed with a thud in the very center of the thicket.

"What did you say?" Damon asked as he climbed back to safety.

"Don't drop?" Jessie said, her voice a bit sheepish. "I realized what those plants were."

"Pretty, weren't they?" he said and grinned.

"You won't think so for long," Jessie told him. "You just landed in poison ivy."

▲ ▼ ▲

"Whoops," Screech mumbled.

"Whoops?" Zack repeated, looking up from trying to get one of the cans of juice opened with the can opener attachment on Slater's Swiss Army knife. Either he didn't have the knack, or the can was resisting. Worn out with the effort, Zack gave up the battle. "Don't tell me that the chicken fell off the spit and into the fire again."

"Okay, I won't tell you," Screech said. "But you might want to know that we don't have a spit anymore."

"What?" Zack glanced over to see the piece of wood they'd balanced between two forked branches was now broken in half and burning brightly.

Screech watched it teeter, then fall. He peered into the fire pit where the burned remains of dinner smoldered. "I sure hope everyone likes their chicken really charbroiled, because it looks like all three of the ones we tried to cook are very well done."

"Make that burned to a crisp," Slater suggested.

"At least we still have my potatoes to eat," Zack said.

Slater poked a stick he'd sharpened to a point into a lump of something that looked like a charcoal briquette. "You mean these things? Maybe we can save some of the chicken yet."

"Yeah, maybe we could," Screech agreed.

He poked another sharpened stick into the fire, stabbing what looked like a larger briquette. The stick broke in half when it hit the big black lump.

"Maybe not," Screech said.

"Well, there's still a bunch of carrots. If they're good enough for rabbits, they can be good enough for us," Slater said. "How many are left?"

"You mean after all the ones we ate while we worked?" Zack asked. "Oh, about a dozen."

"You're kidding. I thought the girls brought a couple pounds of them," Slater said.

"They did," Zack agreed. "Emphasis on the *did*. We ate most of them already."

"Which means we're in big trouble," Slater said.

"Don't remind me." Zack ran a hand back

through his hair and looked off to where the trail ran into the trees. "What time is it?"

Screech craned his neck to look at the sun. He raised his arm and judged the angle of the shadow it threw on the ground. "It's—"

"Nearly five o'clock," Slater said, checking his wristwatch. "They'll be back any minute. What are you going to do?"

"You mean, what are *we* going to do," Zack corrected.

"No, I mean, what are *you* going to do," Slater insisted. "You're the one who's proving he can cook, preppie."

Screech shook his head sadly. "If only we had marshmallows, I could whip up a nice casserole."

"In what? The girls brought only one pot," Zack said.

Slater looked surprised. "Well, why didn't you say so?" He fished around in the glowing embers of their campfire. "If we can salvage even small bits from these burnt chickens, we can make soup and toss the carrots in it."

"Soup? What are we going to serve it in? There aren't any bowls," Zack told him. "Believe me, I've got the remaining supplies memorized."

"We've got insulated cups," Screech said.

"And didn't you say something about some spices?" Slater asked. "I'll bet the girls were planning on making a stew."

"They could have told us," Zack said.

"If we clean off the potato peelings you made earlier, we can dump them in, too," Slater said. "It'll be weak soup, but it will be something. What about bread?"

"That we've got." Zack pushed to his feet. "We don't have much time. I'll get the cooking pot, the spices, and the bread. Screech, fish the chickens out of the ashes, and Slater, get some more wood to build the fire back up. Now we're *really* cookin'."

▲ ▼ ▲

It didn't take long for the sun to go down in the mountains. After removing the boiling pot of soup from the campfire, Slater had built up the flames so that it was more of a bonfire than a cookfire. Still, the fifth graders and the girls were huddled in blankets as they sat around it trying to keep warm. Damon sat a bit apart from everyone else, trying not to itch, and looking miserable.

"You know," Lisa whispered to her friends, "it's hard to remember that I thought Damon was really handsome."

"With all those spots of calamine lotion all over him, he does look pretty strange," Kelly agreed.

"Actually, he reminds me of Screech," Lisa said.

"It's probably all the white dots on his face," Jessie suggested. "They look a lot like the splotches of marshmallow Screech wore after his burritos exploded."

Lisa shivered just at the memory of that day. "That must be it. And speaking of food, when do you think we get to eat?"

Kelly wrinkled her nose. "After seeing what was in that pot, I'm not so sure I want to eat."

"It didn't smell too bad," Jessie said.

"It's the taste I'm worried about," Kelly said.

"Well, at least I have a submarine sandwich hidden away from lunch to eat later on," Lisa commented.

"No, you don't," Jessie told her. "Your little friend Melissa decided to redo her nails . . ."

"They did get terribly chipped when she was trying to dig up that pretty rock," Lisa agreed.

". . . and she found your sandwich. I found her and Erin and Angelique feasting on the sub a little while ago," Jessie finished.

Lisa sighed in resignation. "Then I guess we're all stuck with Zack's weird soup."

Kelly poked Lisa in the ribs to direct her attention to where Zack, Slater, and Screech were dishing up dinner. They had used a shoelace to lash a stick to one of the insulated cups and were busy filling other cups with their makeshift ladle.

"It shouldn't be long now till we find out whether they can cook or not," Kelly said.

A few moments later, Slater strolled over carrying a fairly flat-sided piece of wood. He was using it as a tray and presented it to the girls with a small bow.

"Welcome to Chez Wilderness," Slater said. "We recommend that you use the corners of your blankets to hold the cups. They are rather hot."

Lisa took one of the makeshift bowls, carefully using her blanket as a hot pad as she did so. She peered down into the cup. "What are those *things* floating in there?"

Jessie took a cup and stared down into it. "Screech didn't add bugs to this, did he?"

"Eww." Lisa hastily put her dinner back on Slater's rough tray.

"Bugs are full of nutrients," Slater said, "but we stopped him. Those are raisins."

Kelly looked at her cup. "You put raisins in soup?"

"Doesn't everyone?" Slater asked. He forced Lisa to take back her cup before moving over to give Damon Knight his mug of dinner.

The girls exchanged looks.

"Well, who's going to be brave enough to try it first?" Jessie asked.

"I think it's still too hot to taste," Lisa said, squinting at the strange contents in her cup. "What is that? A noodle?"

"You got a noodle?" Kelly peeped into Lisa's soup. "No, I think that's a piece of potato skin."

"I've got a carrot. Or I think it is," Jessie said. "One of the raisins is using it as a raft."

"There's some green flakes in mine," Kelly said.

"Probably the parsley or oregano we brought along," Lisa told her.

Jessie swirled her soup with her spoon. "I sure don't see any chicken in there, or smell it, either. What do you think they did with it?"

Kelly shrugged. "Well, here goes nothing." She took a spoonful cautiously, then glanced up, a surprised look on her face. "Hey! It isn't bad."

Lisa attempted a taste. "It isn't good, either."

Jessie tried some. "Maybe if they had left the raisins out it would be better."

Around the campfire, the fifth graders blew on their soup then tasted it. While the girls watched, the children's faces lit up and they ate their dinner quickly.

"Can we have more?" Swaine asked as Zack, Slater, and Screech sat down with their own cups.

"Yeah," Erin seconded eagerly. "This is really good."

"It is?" Slater sounded surprised.

Zack stomped on his friend's foot, warning him to keep quiet on their expertise, and got up to dish out

second helpings. "Guess you'll take back what you said earlier, right, Erin? Boys can cook."

"Maybe," Erin said. "What did you make for dessert?"

"Uh, dessert?"

"Soup is okay," Erin explained, "but you can't really cook until you can make brownies."

Kelly glanced over at her friends. "You know," she said, "I think Erin's absolutely right."

Lisa looked confused. "About the soup being good?"

"No. About the brownies."

Jessie ate her soup and then wrinkled her nose. "And I sure wish we had some of them right about now."

Lisa pinched her nose with one hand and sipped at her soup. She shivered when she finished. "Boy, is that ever right. But you know, after drinking this stuff, I'm afraid even a brownie would taste bad."

Chapter 10

▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

Jessie followed Slater when he walked to the bus to store the cooking pot in it for the night. She was pleased that he looked happy to see her, his grin wide enough to deepen his devastatingly attractive dimples.

Those dimples wouldn't be in sight much longer, she told herself, because when Slater heard what she had to say, he wouldn't be smiling.

"Boy, am I glad to see you," Slater said. "I thought at first that Melissa was following me again. Did you see the way she insisted on sitting next to me all through dinner? I think she must have been in Lisa's cosmetics because she had on so much perfume, I could hardly smell my soup."

"We've got to talk," Jessie said.

"Great. Let's walk while we talk." Slater looked up at the sky and took a deep breath of the cool mountain air. "It's a really nice night."

Jessie wasn't in the mood to enjoy the scenery. "It's about pretending to be going together again," she told him as they strolled off down the unpaved road that led to the campsite. It wouldn't do to attempt any of the steep trails in the dark.

"What about it?" Slater asked. He entwined his fingers with hers, swinging their linked hands between them as they walked.

Jessie's courage nearly disappeared. It felt so good to be holding hands with Slater again, to be together alone on a romantic night.

But the whole situation was a lie, and Jessie found, as nice as it was, if she and Slater weren't together for real, she didn't want to pretend that they were.

"I can't do it," Jessie said.

"Do what?"

"Act like you're my boyfriend. Melissa's crush is just temporary. Once we go back to Palisades, she'll forget all about you."

"Well, sure. I know that, momma. We just have to act like we're going steady until we get home tomorrow," Slater explained. "Although it is awfully nice to be here with you right now."

Jessie's heart did a funny little flip-flop. What if

asking her to pretend with him was just Slater's way of letting her know he really wanted to be back together with her? What if it wasn't? She'd be really hurt and all because she let her imagination run away with her. Still . . .

"There are other ways to get Melissa disgusted with you," Jessie said. "You don't need me to help you. And to tell you the truth, Slater, I—"

Slater's head turned quickly and he looked back over his shoulder. "Did you hear something?"

"Hear something? You mean, like a wild animal?" Jessie's heart was really pumping now because she was frightened.

"No, I don't think so. This was more like a footstep," Slater assured her quickly. "I'll bet it's Melissa checking up on our story."

Jessie relaxed. "Whew. For a minute there, I was really scared."

Slater grinned and slipped his arms around her waist. "Scared? You, Jess? Don't worry, I'll protect you."

"From a wild bear? How?" It had felt nice to hold his hand. Being held in his arms was even better. Unable to stop herself, she slipped her arms around Slater as well.

"We Neanderthals have our ways," he said, his voice dropping to a soft caressing tone. "And just in case Melissa is watching . . ." Slater's voice trailed

away as he stared into Jessie's eyes. Then his lips met hers in a soft kiss.

Jessie's heart started doing back flips. When the kiss ended, she pulled back a little in his arms. "So that was just for Melissa?" She needed to know for sure before she let herself get too happy.

"That kiss was. But this one's for me," Slater murmured, and kissed her again.

▲ ▼ ▲

It was late by the time the fifth graders were all settled in their sleeping bags and dreaming of new adventures. Kelly was tired, too, but she had promised to meet Zack back by the campfire. The idea of sitting with him under the stars was really romantic.

Maybe it was just a night for thinking romantic thoughts, though. She'd certainly thought Jessie had been thinking them when her friend had come back to the girls' tent. By the light of her flashlight she could see Jessie's eyes shining brightly, her face a bit flushed. Rather than say where she'd been, Jessie had just said good-night and crawled into her sleeping bag. Lisa had been busy doing her nightly beauty routine—putting cream on her face, filing her nails, planning her wardrobe for the next day—so Kelly had said good-night to her, too, and slipped out of the tent.

The night air was pretty cold, but Kelly had

remembered to bring a blanket to wrap around her shoulders to keep her warm. The sky was really black, and she was surprised to find there weren't any stars. The moon was hidden behind a cloud.

Over by the fire, the night was glowing and warmer looking. Zack had built up the fire again, and was sitting cross-legged on the ground poking at the wood, rearranging the logs as the flames danced along them.

Kelly sighed happily. Roaring fires were so romantic, and Zack looked so handsome, his usually neatly combed blond hair messed up and hanging over his forehead.

"Hi," she said, sinking down to sit next to him. "What happened to Damon?"

Zack frowned. "Damon?" he echoed. "*Mr.* Knight took his bottle of calamine lotion and went to bed. When did you start calling him by his first name?"

He sounded jealous. The idea that he was made Kelly feel happy inside. "Oh, just since he asked Jessie, Lisa, and me to call him that this afternoon."

"Oh." Zack poked at the fire some more, looking at it instead of her.

"Did you want to talk about something special?" Kelly asked. "If not, I'm pretty exhausted, so I'll say good-night."

She started to get back to her feet, but Zack's voice stopped her.

"Kelly?"

He sounded funny, as if he were unsure of himself, and that was not the Zack Morris she knew. Kelly sank back down on the ground. "Uh-huh?"

"We kind of got interrupted earlier today," he reminded her.

Kelly thought about how Swaine and Melissa had crawled up next to them just as she and Zack were going to kiss. She smiled at the memory. "Yes, we did," she said softly.

"I thought we'd have had a lot more time together on this trip than we have," Zack said.

"Maybe we will tomorrow," Kelly suggested.

"I hope so." He tossed his stick into the fire and watched it some more, silently.

This time Kelly didn't try to leave. She waited for Zack to work up the courage to tell her whatever it was that he'd asked her to meet him to hear. The way he was acting reminded her of the first time he'd asked her to go steady. He'd been nervous and ready to say anything but those special words. When he had, she'd been so happy, she'd cried.

Could he be planning to ask her to go steady again? And if he did, what would she say? She loved him most of the time but wasn't sure if she should be his girlfriend again. She'd been hurt so often in the past, she wasn't going to let Zack hurt her any more. Before she accepted his class ring this time, Zack

would have to prove that he was . . . well, true blue like the Sue in Damon's poem.

Zack glanced up at the sky. "No stars," he said.

"No stars," Kelly agreed. "I think there's a cloud cover tonight."

Zack looked toward the two long dormitorylike tents. "Guess everyone else is asleep."

"I think so," Kelly said.

Zack stared into her eyes. His were bright with a reflection of the fire, the flames dancing in them. "Kelly?"

"Yes, Zack?"

"I . . ." He stopped and cleared his throat. "I, uh, have something that I . . ." He stopped again, swallowing loudly this time.

Kelly leaned toward him. "Yes, Zack?"

He touched her face gently with his fingers, his touch feather light on her cheek. "You're so pretty," he said.

"You really think so, Zack?"

"All the guys think so, Kelly. But you're special to me."

"Thank you." She lowered her eyes. "You're special to me, too."

"Really?" He sounded relieved.

"All the gang is special to me," Kelly said.

"Oh."

She looked up at him through her lashes. "But especially you, Zack."

His lips curved in a happy grin. He fished in his jeans pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. "Kelly, I—"

Above them the sky lit up with a flash of lightning, followed seconds later by a loud crash of thunder.

Kelly jumped in surprise. "Oh dear. It looks like it's going to rain. We'd better go back to the tents."

"Don't go in yet," Zack pleaded. "I just want to read you this poe—"

Another bolt of lightning split the sky, spilling buckets of rain from the heavy clouds.

Kelly and Zack both got to their feet. The fire sizzled behind them. "We'd better run for it!" Zack shouted over the noise of the beating rain.

Kelly pulled the blanket up over her head. She glanced at the now soggy paper in Zack's hand. What was it? A letter? A list? It couldn't be what she thought he had almost called it. It couldn't be a *poem*!

Kelly grabbed his hand. "But weren't you going to—"

Rain was dripping from his hair. His clothes were already soaked. Zack didn't seem to even feel the rain. "Gosh, but you're beautiful," he said and kissed her quickly. "I'll see you tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay," Kelly promised. She was sure that her

feet never touched the ground as she ran to her tent. Her heart had sprouted wings at the idea that maybe . . . just maybe . . . Zack had written her a poem! Her very own poem.

▲ ▼ ▲

The sun was back and shining brightly the next morning, but the rain had turned the campground into a field of puddles and mud holes. Jessie tried to avoid them all, weaving a crooked path from the girls' tent to what had once been the fire circle but now looked more like a pond for ducks. She had taken a long time to decide on her outfit for the day, even asking Lisa's opinion of her soft lime green camp shirt and cut-off jeans. Even though she hated it when girls dressed to impress boys, today she wanted to look her best for Slater. If they were really getting back together, it would have to be through a compromise: He would have to stop doing the things that irritated her and she would have to do *some* of the things that he liked, like dressing specially for him. If she remembered correctly, he'd always liked it when she wore this particular shade of green.

"Hey, Jessie! Watch this!" Erin called, running across the clearing. She jumped in a large mud puddle near where Jessie stood. Muddy water sprayed everywhere, but most of it settled in a shower over Jessie.

"Arghhh!" Jessie growled, baring her teeth.

"Oops," Erin said sheepishly. "Sorry. I didn't know it would splash you."

"Hey, Jess, isn't that a new look for you?" Slater asked as he crossed the campground toward her. He was wearing a good bit of mud himself, she noticed. It was smeared across his sweatshirt and jeans as if he'd wiped his hands on his clothes. "If you want some breakfast, you'd better hurry up, Erin. Zack is serving the last of the oatmeal, but it won't last long."

"Oatmeal? But we want pancakes," Erin said.

"Well, we aren't having pancakes. You'll be lucky to get anything," Slater told her.

Erin glanced at Jessie once more, trying to judge if she'd been forgiven. Jessie glared at her, not ready to shrug off having a surprise mud bath very soon. Erin apparently read the chance of retaliation in Jessie's face and turned tail and ran.

"How did Zack make oatmeal? Everything's too wet to build a fire," Jesse asked.

"He didn't actually make it, he just poured water over the oats," Slater replied. "Anyway, Jessie, I need to talk to you. I've been thinking about what you said last night."

What had she said? Jessie wondered, quickly thinking back. All she could remember was the way she felt when Slater had kissed her.

"It is dumb for us to pretend we're still going

together. So I'm going to scare Melissa off by making her think I'm disgusting," he said, and grinned. "Pretty good plan, huh?"

It was a stupid plan, especially if it meant they wouldn't be holding hands, taking walks, or sharing kisses anymore.

"I don't know, Slater," Jessie said. "Maybe I was wrong."

Slater chuckled. "You, wrong? Come on, Jess. I know you better than to believe you think that."

"So last night was all pretend?"

"Well, yeah. Melissa was watching us," he said.

Jessie glared at him. "Even when you kissed me the second time?"

Slater looked a bit embarrassed. "Oh, well, er . . . I sort of forgot we were pretending," he confessed.

"You forgot?" Jessie's voice was cold enough to turn water into ice cubes.

Slater shrugged. "Well, it was kind of romantic last night, and . . ."

"And I was the only girl stupid enough to be in the woods with you," Jessie finished for him. "That's okay, Slater. I was pretending, too. Pretending I liked it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have things to do." And, turning on her heel, Jessie stormed across the campground. "Boys!" she fumed. There was no understanding them.

Chapter 11

▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

The fifth graders were lined up and glaring at their teacher. Damon looked even worse in the bright morning light. He hadn't slept much, the itching having kept him awake, and because he couldn't irritate the poison ivy rash on his face, he hadn't shaved. The bristles of his beard made the heavy coating of calamine lotion look like fuzzy mold.

He had brought a hammock along on the trip in case there wasn't enough room for him in the dormitory tents. Zack and Slater had hung it between two trees, and now the young teacher lay sprawled in it, cuddling the bottle of calamine lotion close to his chest.

When she had first seen him that morning, Lisa had shivered with horror. Once she might have

thought Damon was dashingly handsome, but each time she saw him now, it was harder to remember that.

It wasn't Damon that had brought her rushing out of the tent, though. It was Kelly's frantic call for help. Lisa had been in such a hurry she had abandoned her nails halfway through the second coat of Kiss of Dawn polish—although South Seas Coral Sherbert would have been far more appropriate with her orange-and-pink T-shirt and shorts. But since Melissa was wearing that shade, it just wouldn't do to have two girls wearing the same nail polish while on the same camping trip. Lisa just hoped that no one noticed her fingertips were only half painted. She had her reputation as a fashion plate to think of, after all.

Kelly and Jessie stood off to the side, Kelly looking worried as she watched the mob of ten-year-olds and Jessie looking unhappy.

"What's up?" Lisa asked.

"The natives are rioting," Jessie said.

"Natives?" Screech materialized at Lisa's side. He screwed up his face, turning his head this way and that, listening. "Funny. I didn't hear any native drums. That's usually how you are warned before an attack, you know." He looked sly and knowledgeable. "I've seen it happen a few too many times in *Jungle Jorge and the Misplaced Mongoose* to let it happen to me."

"*Jungle Jorge*? That's a movie, dork," Lisa said in disgust.

"I know," Screech assured her brightly. "I've seen it ten times."

"Well, I don't think we're dealing with quite the same kind of native here, Screech," Jessie explained. "It's Damon's class that is revolting."

"Really?" He looked extremely interested. "Why? Did Mr. Knight give them a pop quiz? That always makes me want to revolt."

The girls didn't need to explain any further, though, because Erin was voicing her classmates' grievances.

"You promised we'd do more hiking today," Erin complained to Damon. "We only went on one trail and we want to go on the other one."

Damon caught himself beginning to scratch a spot on his arm, and hastily dabbed lotion on the spot. "Maybe we should just all go home," he suggested.

"No way," Swaine insisted, stepping up next to Erin.

She glanced at him and nodded in agreement. "Yeah. A promise is a promise, Mr. Knight."

"Sometimes things happen that cancel out promises," Damon said sadly. "And I really think I should go see a doctor."

The fifth graders didn't agree with his suggestion.

Damon looked harried. "Listen, I know I promised, but I can't risk falling in any more poison ivy while rescuing any of you."

Erin and Swaine looked at each other, then went into a huddle with their classmates. When they broke, Swaine had taken over as the spokesperson. "We all promise not to need any more rescuing," he said.

Lisa rolled her eyes. "I don't think I'd believe that one," she whispered to her friends.

"Me, neither," Kelly said. "But Damon's right. He should see a doctor."

"True," Lisa agreed. "Although using the lotion from the first aid kit is the same treatment my parents would recommend." Having two doctors in the family, Lisa rated as a medical expert. At least, she did as far as her friends were concerned.

"So Damon's condition won't change if we stay up here for a few more hours?" Jessie asked.

"He'll live," Lisa assured them. "Why?"

"Because I think *we* should take the kids on a hike. I'll bet they won't shut up until someone takes them along that other trail."

"That's a great idea, Jessie," Kelly declared excitedly. "It doesn't have to be as long a hike as we did yesterday, just long enough to wear Erin and her friends out."

"Wear *them* out?" Lisa asked faintly. "My legs hurt from yesterday's hike. I feel like all the escalators at the mall were broken and I kept going back and forth between stores on different floors. Hey, maybe the guys can lead this one." She looked hopefully at Screech since he was the only male member of the gang in sight.

Screech heaved a huge sigh. "I'd like to help you, babe," he said, "but we've got a mega important assignment of our own."

"Like what?" Jessie demanded.

"Lunch," Screech declared, his voice rising to a squeak and breaking on the word.

"That means it's up to us," Kelly announced. "Can we handle it, girls?"

"Absolutely," Jessie said.

Lisa didn't look as eager, but after heaving a deep sigh, she nodded her head. "Oh, all right. I'll go."

Kelly hugged her friends quickly, then stepped up next to Damon's gently swinging hammock. "I know Mr. Knight promised to take you hiking, but since he isn't feeling well, would it be okay if Lisa, Jessie, and I take you?" she asked the younger kids.

Rather than greet the offer with excitement, Erin and her friends went back into a huddle. When they broke this time, it was to bargain with the teenagers.

"We'll go if you promise that *he* doesn't go with us," Swaine said, pointing at Screech.

"No problem," Jessie assured them before Screech could say a word.

"And it can't be just a short hike. It has to be a long one."

"It can't be too long," Kelly said. "We have to go back to Palisades after lunch."

The fifth graders were stubborn. "We want a long one. Promise?" Erin demanded.

Lisa broke under the impact of a dozen determined stares. "Yes, we promise," she snapped.

"Okay," Swaine said. "Let's go."

▲ ▼ ▲

The hikers had all just disappeared up the trail on the opposite side of the camp when a new problem arose. Flies began to take an interest in Damon's sticky lotion-coated arms and face. Swatting them away, he fell out of his hammock.

Screech was at his side instantly. Unfortunately in helping Damon to his feet, Screech managed to trip him so that the teacher landed flat on his face in the mud again.

"Oops. Sorry," Screech mumbled.

Damon pushed himself up and scraped mud out of his eyes. "It isn't that I don't appreciate your help, Screech, but, is there any chance that you can go help Zack and Slater? Wherever they are?" He frowned as a new thought occurred to him. "They aren't hiding after that sad attempt at breakfast, are they?"

"Actually," Screech said, "it was a very nourishing breakfast. We had fruit, grain, and vitamins."

"Oats soaked in water and a swallow of canned juice is nourishing?"

"You forgot that the juice was vitamin enriched," Screech pointed out. "But our supplies are running a bit low, so Zack and Slater went scouting for nuts and berries. They left me in charge while they're gone," he added proudly.

Damon settled in the hammock once more. "Well, since everyone is gone at the moment, I don't mind you being in charge. Especially if you can find me something that will get rid of these bugs," he said as a fly buzzed close by his head.

Screech put on his most thoughtful expression. "Hmm, something to repel bugs. Usually, I'm trying to attract them. Bugs are our friends."

"Not these," Damon insisted, swinging at the pesky fly again.

Screech's face lit up. "I think I have just the thing," he said, and rushed off to the boys' tent. He was back a few moments later with a spray bottle full of a mysterious-looking fluid.

Damon looked at it, not too sure he wanted to know what it was. Or if he wanted to use it. "What is it?" he asked suspiciously.

"Actually," Screech admitted, "it's bear repellent.

I invented it myself, and, if I do say so myself, it works extremely well."

Damon smacked at a second fly. "How can you be sure?"

"Have you seen any bears around here?" Screech asked.

"No, but—"

"Ah," Screech said, "but you wonder if it will work on bugs. Let's try it."

Before Damon could protest, Screech squirted bear repellent on the largest fly as it dived in for a fresh attack on Damon's arm. The fly froze in midair, then dropped to the ground. Screech was sure he'd seen an expression of surprise on the insect's face before he fell.

"Well, I'll be," Damon murmured in amazed appreciation.

Screech shook his head sadly. "I murdered it," he said staring down at the dead fly.

"More power to you," Damon declared. "Hand that stuff over." In a short time he had sprayed the air around the hammock. A faint mist fell over him as he settled down to rest, a contented smile on his face. "What's in this stuff?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Screech said. "I'd have to consult my notes back in the chemistry lab. The only ingredient I do remember is honey."

Damon bolted upright. "Honey?"

"Well, it needed to stick to things, and I'd had a peanut butter, honey, pickle, and hard boiled egg sandwich for lunch . . ."

Damon shuddered at the mere idea.

". . . and my fingers were a bit sticky. That's what gave me the idea. It made the solution smell a lot better, too," Screech added.

Damon glanced down at the dead fly. "I know it killed this pest, but won't the honey attract other bugs?"

Screech shook his head sadly. "You're forgetting, Mr. Knight, this is not *bug* repellent. It is *bear* repellent."

"Meaning?" Damon asked.

"I don't know what it will do other than that," Screech explained.

Damon collapsed back into the hammock. "Suddenly, I don't feel very well," he mumbled.

"Would you like a drink of water?"

"We still have some?" Damon asked. "I thought we made sure the kids took the last of it in their canteens."

"We did. But I could get you some from the stream. I can filter some for us with my portable water filtering kit," Screech said.

Damon nodded. "There's a natural spring nearby.

That's why I chose this spot for the camping trip. Maybe I will take some to splash on my face."

"I'll get it for you," Screech offered, and took off through the trees headed toward the bubbling sound of the brook. He thought he heard a buzzing in the bushes but it soon faded, so he forgot about it.

He was just starting to pump water through the filter when there was a loud crashing noise in the woods behind him. *Bears!* Screech thought a moment before Damon Knight came down the slight hill, stumbling over tree roots and wildflowers in his hurry. Hitting the rocky bank, the teacher took a dive forward and fell full length into the stream, sending a spray of water shooting into the air. A bunch of angry bees buzzed after him and hovered over the submerged teacher waiting for a chance to attack.

"Screech?" Damon said weakly.

"Yes, Mr. Knight?"

"The next time you make up the bear repellent, I'd suggest you leave the honey out," Damon said.

"Do you want me to make you some of my bee repellent?" Screech asked. "If I can find the ingredients I need, it won't take me long to whip up a batch."

"No, thanks," Damon called, sinking lower in the stream. "With my luck, I'd be attacked by a bear if I used it."

▲ ▼ ▲

Kelly wiped sweat from her brow. "Boy, I didn't think this hike was going to be this hard," she admitted to Jessie. "Keeping everybody together is nearly impossible. If we didn't keep counting heads, I'll bet we'd lose some of the kids."

"Yeah," Jessie agreed. "I counted five in my batch."

"Four in mine," Kelly said.

Lisa walked up to them and collapsed back against a tree. "Seven of them on the trail ready to head back," she announced.

Jessie frowned. "Five, four, and seven? That's sixteen. There are only supposed to be twelve kids. We must be counting some of them twice."

Kelly sighed. "Okay, that means we have to have them all line up."

Jessie glanced at her watch. "And we'd better do it soon. If we don't get started back, we'll be late and Damon and the guys will be worried about us."

"Isn't that sweet?" Lisa said.

Kelly grinned at her friend. "It is if you think having Screech worry about you is sweet."

"Eww." Lisa wrinkled her nose. "That's right. Well, let's get this show on the road. Now that I think about it, I don't want anybody worrying about me."

But when the girls had the fifth graders rounded up and in a line, the count they made was two short.

"Where are Erin and Swaine?" Kelly asked.

Their classmates shrugged or looked at each other.

"Come on," Jessie insisted. "Somebody has to know which way they went."

Kelly looked at her friends. Her voice trembled. "What if something happened to them? What if there was a cliff we didn't know about? Remember what happened yesterday? If Damon hadn't been there to rescue Swaine, the boy might have broken his neck. What if he has now? What if Erin has?"

Lisa forced Kelly to sit down. "Don't panic," she said. "They probably just wandered off. They'll hear us if we yell for them, and they'll come back."

But Erin and Swaine didn't return when everyone called their names.

"Oh, gosh. What should we do?" Kelly asked.

Lisa looked at Jessie, her eyes reflecting near panic. "What do you think?" Lisa whispered. "Do we go back and contact the ranger station? I think we passed one on the road up here."

"The first thing we need to do is not get the kids upset," Jessie declared, taking command. "We can't look worried or they'll be frightened."

Kelly nodded but wasn't able to banish the fear from her own eyes.

"The kids all know you best, Kelly," Jessie said. "So I think you should take them back to the campsite. Have them do something fun along the way like look for pretty rocks on the path."

"Okay," Kelly said, and closed her eyes. She gripped her hands tightly together as she gathered her courage. "I want to be an actress. I can *act* as if I'm not worried about Erin."

"Lisa and I will find her and Swaine," Jessie promised.

Kelly opened her eyes and smiled brightly, if falsely, at her friends. "I'm ready. Be careful. If you aren't back in camp thirty minutes after I get there, I'm sending the guys down to the ranger station for help."

"Good idea," Jessie said. "Come on, Lisa. Let's climb that next hill and see if we can see Erin and Swaine."

Lisa followed after her silently. When they were far enough away so that Kelly wouldn't overhear them, Lisa touched Jessie on the arm to get her attention. "Do you think we'll find the kids?" she asked.

"I sure hope so," Jessie said. She kept climbing as she talked. "But I'm afraid that something has happened to them, or one of them. That's why I wanted you along with me. You know first aid. I remember how great you were the last time we went to the mountains and you took care of that Italian cyclist who broke his ankle."

"Eugenio just sprained it," Lisa corrected modestly as she trailed a step behind Jessie. "I only did what had to be done."

"Well, I want you with me to do something now if it has to be done," Jessie said. She reached the top of the hill and scanned the vast area around them.

"Do you see anything?"

"Not yet . . . wait. I think . . . yes, it's Erin!" Jessie cried, and quickly scrambled down the steep slope toward Kelly's frightened little sister.

Chapter 12

▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

Erin was wearing a bright yellow sweatshirt, which was the only reason Jessie managed to spot her so easily in the wilderness of the mountainside.

When Jessie and Lisa reached her, Erin hurled herself into their arms. Although her face was streaked with tear stains, her eyes were dry.

"Are you okay, Erin? Do you hurt anywhere?" Jessie asked.

Erin shook her head.

"Where's Swaine?"

Erin kept her face buried against Lisa and pointed toward a small opening in the rock. It looked like a cave or a small tunnel.

"He went exploring in there?" Jessie pressed.

"Yeah, and then I heard him yell and he didn't come back out," Erin told her.

Jessie and Lisa exchanged a worried look. There were so many dangers the boy could have encountered in the cave. The rock walls could have narrowed so that he got stuck. There could be a drop-off that he might have fallen down. There could have been a wild animal inside who felt cornered and attacked him.

None of the ideas that came to Jessie's mind were good ones. They weren't things to mention out loud, either. Not only didn't she want Erin to hear them and get more scared than she already was, but Jessie didn't want to hear them herself. It was bad enough just thinking about them. And picturing what might have happened to the boy.

Jessie shrugged out of her backpack. "It looks like you skinned your knee, Erin," she said, keeping her voice calm and natural. "How about if you let Lisa clean and bandage it while I go get Swaine?"

"Okay," Erin said.

Lisa looked at the cave opening. It was only wide enough for a person to crawl inside, and then they wouldn't have enough room to turn around to come back out. A quick glance at the dirt floor showed the imprints of Swaine's passage, but it also held the footprints of small animals that had sheltered there.

"What are you going to do?" Lisa asked.

"Find Swaine," Jessie said. She pulled a coil of rope and a small flashlight from her pack. "Good thing I came prepared for anything, isn't it? Because I don't know how much of this rope I'm going to need, I'm not going to tie the end to a tree or anything. You might have to hold on to it."

Lisa nodded solemnly.

Jessie tied one end of the rope to a belt loop on her jean shorts. "Good thing I didn't have anything to change into after getting doused with muddy water," she said, and grinned at Erin and Lisa. "Now I'll only have one set of really dirty clothes to explain to my mom."

"Be careful," Lisa urged. "I don't want to have to crawl in there after you."

"Don't worry," Jessie assured her. "I would never force you to do something that might break a nail."

Lisa laughed, as Jessie had wanted her to, for Erin's sake, if not to ease the tension both of them felt.

"Just hurry back," Lisa said. "I think I just heard Erin's stomach growl, so it must be getting close to lunchtime."

Erin giggled, but Jessie noticed the little girl stayed close to Lisa.

When she crawled inside, Jessie thought the cave seemed even smaller than it had looked. The ground was softer than she'd expected it would be, but there were still odd rocks that stabbed into her hands and knees as Jessie moved deeper inside.

She had been afraid that it would be pitch dark once she was away from the entrance. The small flashlight she carried wasn't powerful enough to give much light, but she switched it on anyway. She scared a field mouse, and herself, when the beam caught the little creature's eyes.

She inched her way carefully along the cave, covering about the same distance as the width of her mother's two-car garage, when the floor started to slant downward. It was a gradual tilt at first, then a more abrupt drop of a few feet to a brighter area below. Jessie guessed that the yell Erin had heard was when Swaine fell off the shallow cliff.

Rather than fall off it herself, Jessie called the boy's name. "Swaine?"

"Jessie?" Swaine asked. "What are you doing here?"

Well, she couldn't see him yet, but he didn't sound hurt. He sounded more irritated, like she was interfering with his fun.

"I came to rescue you," she said.

"Oh," he answered. "I'm not ready to be rescued yet. I found something really neat. Come see."

Figuring that she might as well continue the rest of the way, Jessie levered herself against the stone walls until she could get her legs over the short drop. When she let go, the rock face scraped the palms of her hands, but otherwise she was fine.

The cave widened in this new area and opened onto a room of sorts. Once it had had a ceiling but erosion had broken a hole in the roof through which sun poured. Unfortunately, it wasn't big enough for either Swaine or herself to wriggle through.

The light did make it easy to see what Swaine thought was so neat.

It was better than neat. It was mega awesome!

There were petroglyphs, Indian rock paintings, on the walls everywhere she looked. Some looked like reddish handprints, others like stick drawings of animals, and squiggles, lines, and circles formed mysterious designs. There were a lot of squiggles.

Swaine stood in the middle of the room taking pictures of everything with his camera. There were already a number of Polaroids on the ground near him.

Jessie hated to leave the wondrous find, but she knew that Lisa would be worried if she didn't get back soon, and that Kelly would have the forest rangers searching the mountain for them before very long.

"Yeah, this really is neat," Jessie told Swaine. "But it's just about lunchtime, so we have to leave."

"Okay," the boy said. "Do you think Zack will have something better for us to eat than we had at breakfast?"

Jessie doubted it, but she wasn't about to tell

Swaine that. "It can't be any worse," she declared, trying not to lie to him.

"Do you think cavemen made these pictures, Jessie?" Swaine asked.

"Indians more likely," Jessie answered. "It looks like it was a ceremonial room, someplace where only special members of the tribe went."

"You think it was secret?"

Jessie thought of the difficult passageway through which she had crawled. "Most definitely secret," she said.

"Then do you think the things they left are magic things?" Swaine asked.

"Magic? No—what did you say? Something about things they left?"

"Yeah, I'm gonna take them even if they aren't magic," Swaine said. "They'll be really cool souvenirs."

Despite the sunlight, the cave room still had a number of dark corners. Jessie's eyes had just become accustomed to the dimness when she saw the things that Swaine was talking about. There seemed to be a drum made of skins sewn with beads and shells, and crude tools, some of them decorated with feathers and paint similar in color to that on the walls.

Jessie also saw something that Swaine had apparently missed. Curled in the shadows near the Indian artifacts was a snake. By the markings on its skin and the strange formation of its tail, Jessie knew it was a rattlesnake and poisonous.

"You know, Swaine," she said, trying to keep her voice calm, "those do look like things shamans use to work magic."

"What's a shaman?" the boy asked. He bent to gather up his photographs and carefully place them in one of the outside pockets on his backpack.

"A sort of religious man who is also a doctor," Jessie explained. "I saw a drum and instruments like this in a museum when I was your age."

"Cool," Swaine said.

"In fact," Jessie continued, "these might be those same items."

"But you said they were in a museum," the boy insisted. "So these can't be them."

"Yes, they could," Jessie said. "You see, the Indians don't like to have their ancient ceremonial things in museums. They think that anything that was used by their ancestors should stay right where their ancestors left them, whether they buried them or left them in a cave like this."

"Why?"

"Because the Indian religion is very special to them, and if that's the way they want it, we should respect their feelings. So some of the stuff that was in

museums when I was ten is now back where it was found, just like the Indians want it to be," Jessie explained.

Swaine looked at the walls, then at the small pile of artifacts. "You think it's cursed?" he asked.

Having a rattlesnake guarding them sure sounded like they were cursed to Jessie. "I'll bet they are," she said.

"Would it be okay if I took a picture of them?"

"As long as you do it from here and don't get any closer," Jessie told him.

Swaine surprised her by doing just as she said. When he shoved his camera back in his canvas pack, she urged him toward the entrance to the cave once more, making sure that they both gave the artifacts and the snake, a wide berth. Jessie gave Swaine a boost up to the cave proper, pulled herself up after him, and moments later they were back in the fresh air with a relieved Lisa and a happy Erin.

▲ ▼ ▲

Everybody ate lunch on the bus on the way back to Palisades. Zack and Slater had surprised everyone with peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and ice-cold colas.

"Where did you find this stuff?" Lisa asked them, biting into her second sandwich as if she were starving. With the way rations had been on the trip, she felt like she had been on a crash diet forever.

Zack enjoyed a long drink from his can of pop. "At the next campsite. The people there had enough food for a month's stay."

"And although the price they asked for this stuff was stiff, Zack figured it was worth the money just to make sure Erin's class didn't stake him out in the sun," Slater said.

"Fortunately for you, Screech ran out of bear repellent," Damon said, glancing back over his shoulder briefly as he drove. "You would have been eaten alive by bugs then."

"How are your beestings and poison ivy doing?" Jessie asked.

"Not bad at the moment," he said. "But I think I caught a cold from being in the creek." Damon sneezed suddenly, as if to prove he had caught a chill.

"Well, Erin says her friends all think this was the most awesome trip they've ever taken and they want to do it all again. Personally, though, I'm glad we'll be home soon," Kelly declared. "I don't think I ever want to go on another camping trip in my whole life."

"Oh, it wasn't that bad," Lisa said.

The gang all stared at her.

"You were the one who had to be talked into going with us," Kelly reminded her.

"I know. But other than the bad food and the disasters, I had fun," Lisa confessed. "Besides, I got to set Melissa on the right road to total beauty and fashion sense."

Slater grimaced. "Speaking of Melissa, I still can't get rid of her. I thought that being really disgusting would make her hate me, but she loved it when I was dirty, when I belched, when I—"

"Don't tell us," Jessie pleaded.

"I guess there really isn't very much that ten-year-old girls find disgusting," Kelly said.

"Now you tell me," Slater groaned.

Lisa glanced down the aisle of the bus to where Melissa sat. She was next to Swaine and looking at him adoringly as he told everyone about his adventure in the cave and finding the Indian artifacts. Since he had the pictures to back up his story, everyone believed him.

"Don't look now, Slater, but I think Melissa has found a new hero," Lisa said.

"She has?" Somehow Slater didn't sound as happy at the news as everyone expected he would.

Screech's expression was even sadder, though. "What's the matter, Screech?" Lisa asked.

"I didn't get any new bugs collected, and my bear repellent was a failure," he said, and sighed. "I was so sure it worked."

"Maybe it did," Lisa soothed. "I sure didn't see any bears."

"You wouldn't," Damon called back. "There aren't any bears on the whole mountain. That's another reason I picked that campsite."

Kelly breathed easier. "Well, that's good to hear."

"Does that make you feel better, Screech?" Zack asked.

"No," Screech said. He fished in his pocket and pulled out a photograph. It had been taken by Swaine's camera.

A picture of a bear. It was leaning against the school bus and looking into the empty interior.

Lisa swallowed loudly.

"When was that taken?" Zack demanded a bit nervously. "Do you know how many times I went back and forth from that bus alone?"

"Lots," Slater said. "And you were carrying food most of the time when you made the trip."

"I could have been food," Zack insisted.

"And Jessie and I thought Melissa was spying on us. Maybe it was the bear instead," Slater said.

"I prefer to think it was Melissa," Jessie told him. "She's not as scary."

"That's what you think," Slater mumbled.

"Swaine took the picture this morning," Screech said. "So my invention doesn't work at all."

Zack patted his friend on the shoulder. "Don't worry. Maybe the next batch will be better."

"Just don't expect me to be around when you test it," Lisa said.

"Or me," Damon Knight shouted back.

Everybody laughed.

▲ ▼ ▲

The trip home was a lot different from the drive up the mountain. Instead of making everyone nuts with a zillion verses of the same song, all the fifth graders fell asleep.

Seated in the back of the bus with Kelly, her head resting on his shoulder, Zack was content.

"Kelly? Are you asleep?"

She stirred but didn't move from her comfortable position. "Not yet."

It was now or never, Zack decided. He fished in his pocket for the piece of paper on which he had written down his latest lines. He cleared his throat.

"If someone were to ask me
About the best times in my life,
I'd tell him all about you.
Because all the best times in my life,
Have been with you.
And if you were ever to say,

Zack, please go away,
There would be no more best times in my life.
There would be only sad times.
So please believe me when I tell you,
Kelly Kapowski, that I need to be with you.
I need to hear your laugh, to see your smile.
Only then will I have
The best time in my life."

Kelly sat up when he had finished. Her eyes were bright with tears.

Zack felt a need to clear his throat again. "Uh, I know it doesn't rhyme, but when I tried to rhyme the lines they just didn't say what I wanted to tell you."

"Oh, Zack," Kelly whispered. "It's beautiful. It's the most beautiful poem I've ever heard. And you wrote it for me?"

He nodded. "Uh, you won't tell anyone about it, will you, Kelly?"

"It will be our secret," she promised him. "Our very special moment."

"I love you, Kelly," Zack said simply.

She snuggled back against his shoulder. "And I love you, Zack."

"So, do you think we could . . . ah . . . go steady again?" he asked.

Kelly smiled happily to herself. "Maybe," she

said, but since she cuddled close to him, Zack decided it wasn't that bad of an answer. In fact, it looked as if he had a pretty good chance of getting Kelly back in his life. A very good chance.

Don't miss the next HOT novel about the "SAVED BY THE BELL" gang

PICTURE PERFECT

When Lisa starts to take dieting to an extreme, the rest of the gang decides they have to do something to show her that being thin isn't so important.

Can they help her before she wastes away to nothing? Find out in the next "Saved by the Bell" novel.

FIRESIDE MANNERS

Star-filled nights, fresh air, and all the beauty of nature—nothing quite compares to a weekend camping trip in the mountains. When the gang gets the chance to go, they jump at it. Especially Zack. He's been trying to generate some heat between him and Kelly again, and what better way to do it than snuggled close together in the cool mountain air?

There's only one hitch: They have to chaperon a bunch of ten-year-olds. But how hard could that be? All they have to do is keep the kids so busy all day that they sleep like babies all night, leaving the gang to themselves.

But when they get to the campsite, it's total chaos. These ten-year-olds do *not* do what they're told!

Will Zack and Kelly ever get to warm their toes together? Or will they have to settle for wool socks? Find out when you read *Fireside Manners*, the hot new novel about the "Saved by the Bell" gang.

Aladdin
An imprint of Simon & Schuster
Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020
Cover Design by Chani Yammer
Printed in USA

BORDERS PRICE $3.50
FIRESIDE MANNERS-#18
SAVED BY B 1246 Interned Series
961287 UP 2 61796 SINK
FAMS 31 448 239